

Hakuouki: Hitsuzen

by weezerz2490

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Summary: Destiny. Fate. Sumiko never really believed in any of it until she met that man. Out of place and out of time, all Sumiko wanted to do was protect her friend Chizuru and help her find her missing father. But now things have gotten complicated...

## 1. Prologue

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 1: Prologue<br>\*\*

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><p><strong>Tokyo, Japan<br>2013 New Year's Eve\*\*

"Ha-ahâ€|" Sumiko sighed as she stared up at the bleak winter sky, watching as the vapor from her breath floated upwards toward heaven, while she waited on the corner for the light to change. It was getting late, and it looked like it would snow soon. Normally she loved this time of year, but today everything seemed gray and melancholy, or maybe it was just her. After all, this would be her first time celebrating her birthday and the new year without her parents. A few of her friends had invited her to stay with them and their families for the holidays, but she hadn't wanted to intrude or be a bother. She could try contacting her parents' brothers and sisters, but she doubted they would welcome her presence. "Looks like I'll be celebrating alone this yearâ€|" She thought aloud as something brushed past her. Sumiko's eyes widened when she saw that it was a young child chasing after a bouncing ball.

"No, don'tâ€|" She yelled as the little boy chased it into the middle of oncoming traffic.

\_â€"HOOONNNNK!\_

Without thinking, she ran into the street and pushed the kid out of the way of the truck speeding towards him. She found herself blinded by the headlights, but she felt her hands connect with the child's back as she shove him out of harm's way, towards the sidewalk. The sound of the truck's horn was deafening.

And then there was nothing. No cars. No people. No screams. No sirens. Just absolute silence. She felt something soft and cold land on her cheek. Sumiko opened her eyes and saw that it was snowing. The ground she was kneeling on was already covered in a couple of inches of snow. She looked around in confusion. The busy intersection she had just been in was gone, along with all the cars and people. Judging by the architecture, she seemed to be in some old, historic neighborhood without any street lamps. The night sky was filled with countless stars. It was beautiful, but frightening. What happened to all the lights? Where was she? How did she get here? Was she dead!\_? As all these thoughts and questions started spinning through her mind, she heard the soft crunch of footsteps in the snow and glanced up to see a bald man in traditional dress staring at her from a short distance away. He appeared to have just come out of one of the houses on the street.

"â€| Are you lost?" He asked a carefully, eyeing her with a small degree of suspicion as he took in her strange appearance.

"Yâ€| Yesâ€| I-I think I amâ€|" She said hesitantly, wondering if it would be okay to trust this man. No one else seemed to be out on the streets, and she was feeling incredibly disorientated.

"Are you injured?" He asked, furrowing his brow slightly in concern when he noticed how pale she had gone.

"Iâ€| I don't think so." She replied cautiously. "I'm just veryâ€| confusedâ€|?"

"Perhaps you should go home. It is expected to snow very hard tonight." He suggested.

"I'd like to, but I'm not sure where I am, or how I got hereâ€|" Sumiko said, frowning as she furrowed her brow. The older man stared down at her for a moment in silence, thinking.

"Well, if you have no where else to goâ€| I suppose you could stay at my home, just for the night. You can share my daughter's room with her." He offered kindly, extending his hand to help her up. "I am Yukimura Koudou, a doctor, and you areâ€|?"

"Sumiko. Miyagawa Sumiko."

## 2. The Snowflake Capital

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 2: The Snowflake Capital<strong>

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><p><strong><strong>Almost two years later:<strong>  
>Late December, 1863<br>\*\*\*\*\*Kyoto, Japan\*\*  
><strong>

"Keep going, Chizuru!" Sumiko shouted encouragingly as she and her younger friend ran through the streets of the capital, trying to lose the two men chasing them. Chizuru nodded, panting, as she ran. They could see their breath as the snow fell around them. It reminded Sumiko of the night she had first found herself in the past. Looking back now, that moment went she rushed out into the street roughly two years ago had really changed her destiny.

"Hold it, kids!" One of the men shouted, reminding her that this was no time to reminisce.

"This way!" Sumiko said, grabbing Chizuru by the hand, as she sharply turned the corner and ran into another alley, hoping to through them off. She wished the snow was coming down faster to help cover their tracks. "Hide behind this barrel. I'll be right back."

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru said worriedly, grasping the sleeve of her haori.

"Don't worry." Sumiko said, smiling reassuringly at her. "I'm just going to erase our tracks to confuse them for a while." Chizuru hesitantly let go, and Sumiko quickly removed her haori and used it to smooth out the snow from where they had turned while she backed up to hide behind the barrel with Chizuru. She shivered and put the cold haori back on. She had finished without a moment to spare.

"Damn!" The younger of the two men cursed when they reached the corner and saw the tracks ended. "Where did they go?" He asked, glancing around.

"Those rats are fast." The older man commented, also looking around.

"Stop making excuses, find them!" The two girls remained hidden as they listened carefully to the sound of the snow crunching beneath their feet. Apparently they had decided to split up, because one set of footsteps sounded like it was going further away, while the other sounded like it was coming closer. Good. It would be easier to take down one than two. Sumiko readjusted her grip on her umbrella, getting ready, as the footsteps drew closer. She really wished she had been able to afford her own sword. There was the sound of a sword being drawn from its sheath. Chizuru's hand hovered over the hilt of her kodachi as the younger man's shadow loomed into view. Any moment nowâ€|

\_SLASH!\_

"Waagh!" They heard the older man cry out.

"Yoichi!" The younger man shouted in alarm and rushed off to the aid of the other man. "W-Who are youâ€"\_Aaaah!\_"

"Gyahahahahaha!" Shrill, maniacal laughter echoed through the night as Chizuru and Sumiko exchanged confused and frightened

glances.

"What?" Chizuru whispered, stunned, as they leaned out just far enough to take a peek at what was happening. The two men who had been chasing them were struggling to fend off attacks from two white-haired samurai. In matching haoris. Sumiko's eyes widened. She recognized their uniforms out of history. They were Shinsengumi! But something was wrong. There was a crazed, blood thirsty look in their eyes.

Chizuru gasped when the younger man's opponent bit his blade and shattered it with his teeth. This was insane. That shouldn't be possible!

The man cursed and threw the broken katana away, drawing his short sword, just in time to block the next attack as Yoichi was cut down.

"Gyahahahah!"

"What the hell!?" The young man grit his teeth and managed to push his opponent back, striking him in the shoulder. The crazed Shinsengumi member just let out another shrill laugh after seeing the blood and continued on like it was nothing, even though it was deep wound. "Wh-What's with these guys!?" Sumiko quickly pushed Chizuru back behind the barrel and covered her mouth so she wouldn't scream as the insane samurai slashed the young man's torso and aimed for his head.

"Aaaah!" The man's scream was cut off as they watched the shadow of his opponent's sword thrust clean through his head.

SWISH.

The sword was yanked free.

"Heh?" The drooling lunatic leered at them with crimson eyes when it stepped forward and peered around the barrel at them. Sumiko clenched her jaw, steeling her nerve, as she let go of Chizuru and thrust her umbrella out in front of her defensively.

"Nooo!" Chizuru screamed as the cackling samurai raised his sword, preparing to strike. The moment he thrust his sword at them, Sumiko flashed the umbrella open and twisted as she shut it, momentarily trapping the blade of his sword, and pushed forward with her shoulder like a seasoned linebacker.

"Oryaah!" Sumiko shouted, gritting her teeth as she somehow managed to push the lunatic back. "Run, Chizuru!"

"Sumiko-san!"

Both girl's eyes widened when a sharp blade suddenly and swiftly pierced through his chest from behind just inches away from the tip of Sumiko's nose. Their would-be attacker fell down lifelessly to the ground. Sumiko stared at the handsome man responsible, whom she could see was standing just a couple of feet away from her now, in amazement.

"You were fast this time, Saito-kun." Another handsome young man said

as he stepped into the alley. Sumiko narrowed her eyes. These guys were good. She had never even heard them coming.

"I only did as my duty required." The man who had just saved them replied coolly as his partner approached them. The other man smirked slightly when he saw Chizuru. Sumiko took a step back to put some distance between them and positioned herself protectively in front of the younger girl. She heard Chizuru gasp when a third man stepped up and pointed his blade at them. Sumiko furrowed her brow slightly and tightened her grip on her umbrella.

"Listen, don't try to escape. If either of you tries to run, I'll kill both of you." He said sternly in a low voice. Both girls held their breath as they looked up at the tall man with dark, purple eyes and waving black hair, and the falling snow illuminated by the moonlight. It was like watching out of season sakura blossoms blooming.

THMP.

"Eh?" Sumiko said, blinking, before cautiously glancing back over her shoulder to see that Chizuru had fainted. "Ah! Chizuru!" She called out, trying to rouse the girl, as she quickly knelt down to check on her. "Oi, get ahold of yourselfâ€"this is no time to pass out!"

"My, my. Did she faint because you scared her, Hijikata-san?" The smirking one asked teasingly. Sumiko froze when she heard the name, and her eyes widened. She glanced back up at them as Hijikata put his sword away. No way! \_No way!\_ Why did they have to get caught by\_ the\_ Demon Vice-commander, of all people!\_? She knew life was unfair, but come on!

"Vice-captain, what do we do with the bodies?" Saito asked calmly.

"Just remove their coats and let the inspectors handle the rest." Hijikata replied while Okita confiscated Chizuru's sword and Sumiko's umbrella and the sword that was still stuck in it, so they wouldn't be tempted to try to use them. Normally she would have put up more resistance to having her weapon taken away, but she seriously doubted she had any chance of defeating even one of them without being cut down first, and there was no way she could outrun them while carrying and unconscious Chizuru. She was going to have to bide her time carefully and wait for an opportunity to escape.

"What do we do with these two?" Okita asked.

"We'll take them back to head quarters." Hijikata said.

"Eh? Is it safe not to kill them?" Okita asked, suddenly adopting a serious expression. "They saw what happened." Sumiko furrowed her brow and bit her lip to keep from saying anything that might exacerbate the dangerous situation they were in while Hijikata stared down at her with those sharp eyes of his.

"We'll decide what to do with them after we return." He said, turning away.

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"Is this really necessary?" Sumiko asked as Okita pulled the rope he was using to tie her up even tighter, chagrined. They had decided to tie the girls up until they were ready to question them. Saito was standing guard by the door in case she tried to make a run for it. Hijikata had gone to report that they had returned from their patrol.

"Yep." He said, smiling brightly, as he abruptly stuffed the gag into her mouth. Her eyes narrowed dangerously with the promise of retribution. "My, how scary!" He exclaimed mockingly. "That's a good look you have in your eyes. Not that it'll do you any good." He then proceeded to tie up and gag Chizuru, too. "Later, Saito-kun." He said with a casual wave, slipping out of the room. Saito closed the door behind him. He stared silently at the two girls for a few minutes before walking over and pulling the blanket over them to keep them warm since they couldn't do it themselves. Sumiko gave him a small nod of thanks since she couldn't talk and sighed internally as she stared up at the ceiling, wondering how things could have turned out like this when all they had been trying to do was find Chizuru's father.

### 3. Rude Awakening

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><p><strong>Chapter 3: Rude Awakening<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Sumiko realized she must have managed to nod off sometime during the night, because she found herself being awoken at an ungodly hour by the sound of a huge clump of snow from the roof sliding and crashing down just outside. She noticed the only other person in the room was Chizuru, who also began to stir and wake up.<p>

"!" Chizuru gasped when she opened her eyes and saw Sumiko bound, gagged, and tucked into the futon next to her, and she began struggling against her own bonds. Sumiko wanted to tell her that it was useless since she had been trying to get out of them all night and warn her that doing so would just make her muscles sore, but the gag made that very difficult. Chizuru seemed to catch on to that, though, because she gave up pretty quickly and started glancing around the room as best she could. "Mmph!" She said when they both noticed the silhouette of a man passing by the window and stopping in front of the door.

"Are you awake?" A kind looking middle-aged man asked as he slid open the door. "I'm sorry you were treated like this." He said apologetically as he entered the room and knelt down beside them, pulling the futon back. "I'll untie the ropes. Please wait a moment."

"Mmph." Sumiko said, nodding her head at Chizuru, trying to communicate that he should untie her first.

"I understand." He said, nodding with a small smile. "Ah-ah. That

Souji." He said, sighing regretfully, as he began untying her friend. "Being tied so tightly, it must have been roughâ€|"

"Hmph!" Sumiko huffed indignantly in response. That was a bit of an understatement. He had tied her own wrists so tight, she was pretty sure she'd have welts there for awhile. The kind man smiled wryly at her.

"Can you sit up?" He asked Chizuru, helping her up so he could untie the cloth over her mouth. "You can removed the gag, too." Chizuru took the ball of cloth out of her mouth and turned to watch while he untied Sumiko.

"E-Excuse meâ€| where is this place?" She asked tentatively. "Who are youâ€|?"

"Oh, pardon me. I am Inoue Genzaburou." He said, finally introducing himself, while Sumiko removed her own gag. "This is the Shinsengumi head quarters."

"Shinsengumi!\_?" Chizuru cried, glancing questioningly at Sumiko, who nodded calmly in confirmation.

"You don't need to be afraid. Can you come with me a moment?" He asked, smiling kindly, as he held onto the end of the ropes he had left around their hands to keep them from running off.

The two girls were quietly led to another part of the building.

"What happened?" Chizuru whispered.

"You fainted." Sumiko whispered back. Chizuru made a face to let her know that wasn't what she meant, but before she ask again, Inoue-san had stopped to open a door. They had reached their destination.

"Go in." Inoue instructed them.

"Good morning." A familiar voice greeted them as they stepped into the room and saw all the men waiting for them. "Did you sleep well?" Okita asked. "It looks like that one did." He said, smirking, as he glanced at Chizuru. "She has the tatami mat's pattern on her face."

"Eh!\_?" Chizuru gasped, feeling incredibly embarrassed, as she held her hands to her face and blushed. Sumiko sweat-dropped she couldn't believe she fell for that. Didn't she remember waking up on a futon? Poor Chizuru always had been a bit on the gullible side.

"Stop it, Souji. She'll think it's true." Saito said. "There aren't any tatami marks." He told Chizuru.

"That's mean, Hajime-kun." Okita said with a laugh. "You didn't have to tell her." Both girls furrowed their brows and frowned in annoyance at him. What a terrible personalityâ€|

"That's enough." Hijikata said firmly. "Cut the idle chat."

"Haai." Okita replied, pouting slightly in disappointment.

"Are those the witnesses?" The youngest looking man in the room asked. He appeared to be about the same age as Chizuru. His high ponytail was even longer than Sumiko's. "So thin and small, are you still kids?" He asked.

"You can't say 'kid' to anyone, Heisuke." The muscular guy wearing a green headband with spikey hair said, grinning, as he pet the younger boy on the head, messing up his hair.

"From all the saints' and sages' point of views, you're both similar." Another man with a low ponytail said, smiling wryly.

"The old men should shut up." Heisuke said, swatting away the other man's hand.

"What did you say, bochama?" He asked, pushing down on his head.

"I don't think I'm old enough to be called an old man by you. I can't speak for Shinpachi, but I'm not!" The low-ponytail man said slyly.

"Hey! Are you betraying me, Sano\_!\_?" Shinpachi demanded hotly, furrowing his brow.

"Will the three of you cut it out already?" Kondo asked sternly. At least, Sumiko assumed he was Kondo, since he was sitting in the position that indicated he held the most power in the room, between Hijikata and another man with glasses.

"I apologize for all the gossip." The man with glasses said politely with a wry smile as he turned his head to look back at the girls. "Please don't be afraid. Well, close that and sit down." He said, referring to the door.

"Hai." Chizuru said, obediently taking a seat on the floor while Sumiko shut the door before joining her.

"I'm the leader of the Shinsengumi, Kondo Isami." Kondo began once they were both seated. "This is Captain San'nan, and this person is Toshiâ€"I mean, Hijikata Toshizo, the vice-captainâ€"

"Kondo-san!" Hijikata said firmly, cutting his leader off. "Why are you telling them all of this?"

"I-Is that bad?" Kondo asked, taken aback.

"You don't have to introduce yourself to people you are going to interrogate." Shinpachi said.

"Well, that over-formality is just like Kondo-san." Sano said, smiling

"Ahem." Kondo said, clearing his throat to hide his embarrassment. "Well, let's discuss the main topic. First, let me hear about what happened last night, Saito-kun."

"Last night, failed warriors encountered some rebels in the city." Saito said.

' 'failed'?' Sumiko thought dubiously. 'That's an odd way of putting



itâ€|'

"It ended in a fight, but we dealt with them. These people witnessed that fight." Saito finished.

"I didn't see anything!" Chizuru denied immediately.

"Really?" Heisuke asked skeptically.

"We didn't see it." Sumiko insisted calmly, backing her up.

"Hmm." Heisuke hummed. "Then I guess it's okay."

"Eh? But according to what Souji said, you helped the warriors?" Shinpachi said.

"That's not true!" Both girls objected, glancing at each other.

"We were running away from those rebels." Sumiko explained.

"Then the Shinsengumi people came, so we were kind of saved by them." Chizuru added. Sumiko didn't like the way Okita smirked slightly when he heard that.

"Then you saw very well when the warriors killed the rebels, didn't you?" Shinpachi asked.

Sumiko instantly deadpanned, trying to resist the urge to face-palm. Crap. They had walked right into that oneâ€|

"Huh?" Chizuru gasped softly, realizing her mistake too late.

"You are really honest." Sano said. "That isn't bad, butâ€|"

"Come on, let's just kill them." Okita said. "It's the best way to silence them."

"No way!" Chizuru cried.

"Don't say outrageous things." Kondo scolded him seriously. "The authorities of the country can't kill innocent people like that!"

"Don't make that face. It was just a joke." Okita said.

Sumiko sweat-dropped. This guy was definitely a sadistâ€|

"Only say jokes that sound like jokes." Saito told him calmly.

"Please!" Chizuru said urgently slapping her hands on the floor as she prostrated herself. "We won't say anything to anybody! Right, Sumiko-san!\_?"

"That's enough, take them away." Hijikata said, furrowing his brow as he looked away.

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped when Saito and Inoue grabbed each of them by the arm and started dragging them away. "Please! Forgive us! We won't say anything! Please trust us! Sumiko, say something! Please, we

reallyâ€¦ugh!" She cried out when Saito shoved her back into the room, and she fell to the floor.

"Hey! Be gentle more gentle with her!" Sumiko scolded him sternly as she entered the room and knelt down beside her frightened friend.

"You should prepare for the worst." He advised them grimly. "It won't turn out well for you."

"Why wouldn't you say anything?" Chizuru asked Sumiko once he shut the door, distressed.

"You heard him." Sumiko said, frowning. "It doesn't matter how much we beg. They've already made up their minds about us. Whatever they're going to do to us was probably already decided last night."

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"What? No disposal?" Shinpachi asked, surprised.

"Is it really okay like this, Hijikata-san?" Sano asked, furrowing his brow. "They saw them. The saw the failed ones."

"Last night, we purged some warriors who refused to follow their orders. They were just passing by." Hijikata stated calmly.

"Is that all you want to say?" San'nan asked.

"That's all that can be assumed from what they understand." Hijikata said.

"Well, if you say so, Toshiâ€¦" Kondo said.

"Those were your plans from the beginning, weren't they?" San'nan asked with a slight smile. "Otherwise, you wouldn't have brought them here alive."

"Tch." Hijikata clicked his tongue and furrowed his brow as he looked away.

"Anyway, we have to protect the secret." San'nan said. "We can't just release them like that."

"I know." Hijikata said, standing. "I still have some things to ascertain."

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><p>Author's Note: I have added a link to my profile for a set on polyvore that shows more of what Sumiko looks like, for anyone who's curious.<p>

#### 4. In Capable Hands

I own nothing but my OC.

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## <p><strong>Chapter 4: In Capable Hands<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>GONNNG~<p>

The girls could hear a temple bell ringing as the white paper of the doors and windows of their room began to glow a pale red, indicating that the sun was setting. They had been left to stew in there all day, but at least it had given them more than enough time to untie each other's wrists from the remaining ropes.

"We're losing the light." Sumiko whispered. "If we're going to make a move, we should decide what it is and do it soon. What do you want to do?"

"If we keep waiting here, we'll surely be killed." Chizuru whispered thoughtfully. "They took my swordâ€| Those men will surely prioritize the Shinsengumi's convenience over ours."

"I think so, too." Sumiko admitted grimly.

"We have to run away." Chizuru said resolutely.

"Right." Sumiko agreed, nodding. They carefully slid the door open as quietly as possible and checked both directions before silently tip-toeing out of the room. They stopped when they reached the corner and cautiously peeked around the edge to make sure no one was headed their way.

"!" They both yelped in surprise when they felt themselves being yanked up into the air by the back of their kimono collars. Hijikata had them both by the scruffs of their necks, one in each hand.

"Idiots, did you think you could run away?" He asked sternly.

"Well, it was worth a try." Sumiko said glumly.

"Please let us go!" Chizuru pleaded.

"I'll kill you if you run away. I think I told you that last night." He reminded them.

"If we don't escape you'll kill us anyway, won't you?" Sumiko asked pointedly as both girls started to struggle to get away. "I've never once begged for my life before, and I don't intend to start now!"

"I can't die yet!" Chizuru cried anxiously. "There are still things that I must doâ€|" She trailed off as, much to their surprise, Hijikata gently set both of them back down on their feet.

"Eh?" They said, turning around to stare at him with furrowed brows, confused.

"If you have reasons strong enough to risk your life, try speaking about them." He said. "I'll hear you out."

â€"â^žâ€"

"My name is Yukimura Chizuru, and this is my friend, Miyagawa Sumiko. She is also my father's apprentice." Chizuru said once they were all gathered again in the same room they had been questioned in earlier. "It was about six months ago"

«Flashback»

The cicadas were humming in the summer heat. Yukimura Koudou stood on the porch of his home and business, watching as the paper tail of the wind-chime fluttered in the breeze, while Chizuru and Sumiko cleaned up after the last client.

~TING~

"Chizuru, Sumiko" He said, getting their attention. "To tell the truth, today I'll be going to the capital for awhile."

"Work again?" Chizuru asked.

"Mmn." He said, nodding.

"How long will it be?" Sumiko asked. "Will you need help?"

"I don't know." He said, bowing his head slightly. "It could be one month. It could be two. I'd appreciate it if you stayed here with Chizuru while I'm gone."

"I understand." She said with a wan smile.

"I see" Chizuru said, looking a little down, but then she smiled slightly and raised her head. "Take care, Father." She said, putting on a cheerful face for him. "The capital isn't exactly safe."

"Yes, please, be careful." Sumiko said.

"Don't worry." Koudou said, smiling as he glanced back at them. "I'll send a letter anytime I can while I'm in Kyoto."

"Okay. It's a promise." Chizuru said, smiling.

"If you have any trouble, go to Matsumoto-sensei. He should be able to help you."

«Flashback»

"My father sent me letters as he promised. I received letters almost everyday, faster than I could reply. And yet, suddenly word from my father ceased, and a month passed. Matsumoto-sensei was away as well. I couldn't stand it any longer, so Sumiko-san came with me to the capital, but I didn't know where my father was. We couldn't find any clue of his whereabouts. Then, in the middle of our trip, we were attacked by those rebels." Chizuru finished explaining solemnly while Sumiko placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I see. You and your friend came from faraway Edo in search of your father" Kondo said sympathetically.

"So, that's why a couple of young girls like you were wearing men's

clothes." Hijikata said.

"I see!" Kondo said thoughtfully, nodding his head. "What!?" He started abruptly as his eyes widened in realization.

"Girls?"

"You're girls!?" Shinpachi shouted incredulously.

"It can't be!" Heisuke exclaimed.

"Mmn! I, Kondo Isami, have committed a grave blunder!" Kondo scolded himself, face-palming. "I never dreamed you were girls!"

"I though it was obvious." Okita replied carelessly.

"Yeah, but still! you got no proof, right?" Shinpachi asked.

"What do you mean 'proof'?" Chizuru asked.

"Then how about we have them strip?" Sano suggested with a laugh.

"Eh!?" Chizuru gasped in alarm.

"Try it, and I'll kick your teeth in." Sumiko said darkly, narrowing her eyes.

"No! I won't allow it!" Kondo shouted earnestly on behalf of the girls. "That is absolutely forbidden!"

"Calm down, please." San'nan said calmly.

"But, this is!" Kondo said.

"You said your name is Yukimura Chizuru?" San'nan asked, glancing at Chizuru. "Could your father perhaps be Yukimura Koudou, practitioner of Western medicine?"

"Do you know my father?" Chizuru asked as both girls suddenly perked up. Hijikata frowned and furrowed his brow, as though he hadn't liked what he just heard.

"So, she's Koudou-san's daughter? Does that mean your mentor is also Koudou-san?" Kondo asked Sumiko.

"Yes, I suppose you can say that..." Sumiko replied, nodding, as she furrowed her brow slightly in confusion at Hijikata's reaction. "Can you tell us if you know where Sensei is?"

"All right, you two, how much do you know?" Hijikata demanded abruptly.

"How much?" Chizuru asked, furrowing her brow, too, as she glanced at him.

"About what?" Sumiko asked, wondering why he suddenly seemed so upset.

"Don't play dumb." He said sternly. "Not about Koudo-san."

"What do you mean? Has something happened to my father?" Chizuru asked anxiously.

"Is he alright?" Sumiko asked, concerned. "If you know something, please tell us."

"About a month ago, there was a fire at the clinic at which Koudou-san worked." Saito said. "He has been missing ever since."

"Eh!\_?" Chizuru cried.

"What do you mean, 'missing'?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow. "How?"

"The fire was suspicious, but no body was found in the aftermath." San'nan said. "However, it's possible he was involved in some sort of incident."

"We're in the process of tracking Koudou-san's whereabouts ourselves." Hijikata said. "If you forget all about the events of last night, you can stay under our protection until we find Koudou-san."

"Huh?" Chizuru said, sharing a surprised look with Sumiko.

"Don't worry. We're going to track down Koudou-san for sure." Kondo reassured them, smiling.

"Th-Thank you very much!" Chizuru said gratefully as Sumiko bowed humbly to show their gratitude.

"Good thing you didn't have to die, huh?" Okita asked with a Cheshire cat smile. "For now, that is."

"Uh, yes." Chizuru said, nodding.

"Ever the optimist, eh, Okita-san?" Sumiko deadpanned.

"Well, if you're girls, we've gotta to start treating you better, huh?" Shinpachi said, grinning.

"Shinpatsu-san, you're a sucker for women, aren't you?" Heisuke asked. "But this change of heart is too fast."

"Where's the harm?" Sano asked. "If this will add a little glamour to headquarters, Shinpachi won't be the only one whoopin' it up, I bet."

"Still, as we are warriors, handling them will be difficult." San'nan said. "We must give some thought as to how we're going to treat them."

"Then why don't we make them somebody's servants?" Hijikata said. "Kondo-san's or San'nan-san's."

"No way, Hijikata-san." Okita said. "As the man with the idea, responsibility should fall to \_you\_."

"Ah." Hijikata said, looking slightly taken aback and somewhat

displeased by this turn of events.

"Yeah. They'll be safe by your side, Toshi." Kondo said brightly, causing Hijikata to glance at him.

"It's decided, Hijikata-kun. Do your best to take care of them, will you?" San'nan said with a smile.

"That's our vice-commander, all right!" Sano jeered. "So dependable!"

"All right, thank goodness for that!" Kondo said, relieved to have the matter settled.

"Y-You bastards!" Hijikata muttered darkly, looking extremely putout.

"Haha! I said something good, didn't I?" Okita said, looking rather pleased with himself for having succeeded in putting the vice-commander so far out of his comfort zone.

'What's going to happen to us?' Chizuru thought.

'Are really going to be okay here?' Sumiko wondered as they exchanged a troubled look with each other.

“あゝ”

Hijikata drew his brush across the ink stone on his desk and added a new line of kanji to the composition that he was working on by lantern light.

"What do you think?" He asked the others in the room without looking up.

"About what? Those girls?" Okita asked.

"Yeah."

"They're cute, right? I don't exactly hate them myself. The taller one is pretty feisty."

"That's not the issue here." Hijikata said as he continued to write. "They come to the capital in search of Koudou-san, and that same day they encounter our soldiers. For coincidence, it's a little too convenient, isn't it?"

"You're saying they were attacked hoping to find out more about the Shinsengumi?"

"No way. I don't think they could pull off a performance like that." Okita said. "And only an idiot or someone truly desperate would charge one of them while armed with just a paper umbrella."

Hijikata made no reply. He simply stared down at the paper on his desk with furrowed brow, pondering the fate and motives that brought about their arrival here in headquarters. He hoped for the girl's sake nothing more sinister was at work.

## 5. Caged Birds

Please let me know if you like it! I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 5: Caged Birds<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>January, 1864<strong>

"They're keeping us in here like a couple of caged birdsâ€|" Sumiko remarked with a heavy sigh as she put the brush she'd been writing with down and laid back in the floor. It had already been a few weeks since that night when they were first brought to the headquarters, and it was decided they would stay there for 'protection', but for all intents and purposes they may as well have been under house arrest. In fact, they probably wereâ€|

Chizuru let out a sigh of her own as she stood up and crossed the room to open the window. She was tired of staring at the same four walls.

"It's cold." She said, shivering, when the fresh, cold air wafted over her.

"Take care not to get sick." Sumiko chided her lightly, coming over to place Chizuru's haori over her shoulders. Chizuru smiled softly.

"You're just like a mother, Sumiko-san."

"Can we stick to big sister?" Sumiko asked, smiling wryly. "I know I'm not a teenager like you, but I'm only twenty-four, you know. That's still considered really young where I'm from." Chizuru smiled again and looked down as she began to absentmindedly run her fingers over the hilt of her sword. Even though they had only known each other for two years, the two girls had become very close, like sisters. It might seem strange to think this way, but Sumiko was closest thing Chizuru had ever known to a mother.

Sumiko glanced down at the sword at the younger girl's waist, and placed a hand over the hilt of the one at her own side, remembering the day they had their belongings returned to them.

Â«Â« FlashbackÂ«Â«

\_"The Shinsengumi is responsible for your safekeeping." Hijikata said as they sat before him and San'nan-san. "However, because you're girls, we can't just let you roam around headquarters. That's why you'll continue to dress as men."\_

\_"Hai." The two girls replied obediently.\_

\_"Even if it weren't your intent, the presence of two women would disrupt order within the troop." San'nan explained.\_

\_"Then, what should weâ€|?" Chizuru started to ask, not wanting to be



a bother. \_

\_"You don't have to do anything." Hijikata told her. \_

\_"But we're guests here. Shouldn't we do something to earn our keep?" Sumiko asked. "Though I'm a woman, I'm also a doctor. I primarily specialize in treating animals, but I've been learning how to treat people from Koudou-san. I could be of some help."\_

\_"No." Hijikata said firmly. "We'll prepare a room for you, and you'll stay in there."\_

\_"Huh? Weren't these girls supposed to be somebody's servant?" Okita asked.\_

\_"Idiot! Try to keep your mouth shut, Souji!" Hijikata snapped before coughing to clear his throat. "Alsoâ€¦" He said, smiling slightly, as he picked up Chizuru's short sword and held it out to her.\_

\_"Ah!" Chizuru gasped.\_

\_"This is rather important, yes? No man would be caught wandering around without one." He said, returning it to her.\_

\_"Thank you very much." Chizuru said, smiling, as she held the precious sword close. Sumiko smiled, glad to see her looking so happy.\_

\_"And this is for you." Hijikata said, surprising Sumiko when he held up another sword. "I take it you know how to use one?" Saito said her movements that night in the alley hadn't been those of an amateur.\_

\_"Yes." She said, accepting the sword. From the look of the hilt, it was the same sword she had almost been stabbed with when they were attacked by that crazy rogue Shinsengumi member. "My father taught me." She said, smiling softly, as she thought of him.\_

Â«Â«End FlashbackÂ«Â«

"Still," Chizuru said, bring her back out of her reverie, "I wonder when we'll be able to go looking for my father? Maybe we'll remained locked up like this for goodâ€¦"

"I'd say that's up to your conviction, wouldn't you?" Okita's voice said from somewhere to their lower left.

"Heh?" Chizuru said, blinking, as they leaned further out the window and saw that Okita was sitting on the porch just outside their window. "Ehh!\_?" Chizuru exclaimed, reeling back in surprise. "O-Okita-san, what are youâ€¦?"

"Oh, so that's where you were." Sumiko remarked calmly, sweat-dropping. Once again, she hadn't detected his presence until too late. These guys were more like ninja than samuraiâ€¦

"Huh? Did you not notice?" Okita asked. "Come this time of day, I'm the one in charge of watching you." He reminded them.

'Come to think of itâ€¦ people have been watching usâ€¦' Chizuru

thought. She had almost forgotten about it. "Does that mean you heard everything we said?" She asked.

"Hm?" Okita said with feigned innocence, smiling like the cat that ate the canary.

'He definitely heard usâ€|' Both girls thought simultaneously. Sumiko simply deadpanned while Chizuru looked troubled to discover he had been eaves dropping, feeling a little embarrassed.

"Tonight's dinner has been prepared." Saito announced, causing them to glance over in the opposite direction. "Are you about ready?" He asked, standing calmly on the porch while holding two trays of food.

"Saito-san! Um, Saito-san, you've been there this whole time?" Chizuru asked tentatively. Saito nodded.

'Freaking ninja-samuraisâ€|' Sumiko thought, slightly chagrined. She hadn't noticed him either.

"Hey there!" Heisuke called out as he approached them. "It's feedin' time." He told Saito.

"I have work to do. You go ahead and eat." Saito replied calmly.

"Hijikata-san's order was to not take our eyes off of these two for even a moment." Okita said.

"Then we should just let them eat with us, right?" Heisuke suggested.

"Huh?" Chizuru said, surprised.

"We were ordered not to let them leave the room." Saito said.

"Where's the harm?" Heisuke asked. "Hijikata-san's gone off to Osaka."

"That's right." Okita said thoughtfully. "I'm tired of just watching these two eat." He took the trays from Saito and handed them to Heisuke.

"Huh? What're you giving this to \_me\_ for?" Heisuke asked.

"You're the one who brought it up." Okita replied. "Well, let's go." He said, walking off.

"Huh? Umâ€|" Chizuru said hesitantly, leaning out the window, while Sumiko wasted no time in opening the door and stepping out into the fresh air.

"Ah, it feels good to be outside again!" Sumiko said, stretching. "Come on, Chizuru, what are you waiting for? Let's go eat!"

â€"â^žâ€"

"You took your time!" Shinpachi exclaimed impatiently when they reached their destination. His stomach growled loudly. "What are you guys gonna do about the growls my stomach are makin'?"

"I'm sorry. It's our fault." Chizuru apologized humbly as they entered the room.

"What are they doing here?" Sano asked, surprised to see the two girls out of their room.

"What, you got a problem with it?" Heisuke retorted challengingly.

"Nah, that ain't it." Shinpachi said with a wry grin. "Food tastes better when eaten together, right?"

"Look, quit just standin' there. Have a seat." Sano said as they both scooted aside to let the girls have their cushions.

"Thank you." Sumiko said as both girls bowed.

"My apologies." Chizuru said politely.

"Okay, there." Heisuke said, setting their trays down in front of the cushions.

"Thank you very much, Toudou-san." Chizuru said.

"Yeah, but enough of that 'Toudou-san'." He said. "Everyone calls me 'Heisuke', so I'm fine with that."

"In that case, feel free to call me 'Sumiko'." Sumiko replied with a polite smile, returning the favor.

"B-Butâ€¦|" Chizuru said, looking a little embarrassed. Wasn't that too intimate for someone they barely knew?

"It looks like we're about the same age, so it's better anyways." He added. "And I'll just call you 'Chizuru'."

"So, Heisuke-kun, then..." Chizuru said a bit shyly, blushing slightly.

"Yeah, that's good." He said, smiling in approval. "Okay, Chizuru, Sumiko, nice to 'meet' you again."

"Yes." They said, smiling.

Sano and Shinpachi smiled. Yep. It was definitely nice to have some girls around for a change.

"Thank you for this meal." Saito said, picking up his chopsticks, as the girls took their seats in between the two of them.

"Still, tonight's dinner looks a little stingy, as always." Shinpachi said. "Thereforeâ€¦|" Without warning his chopsticks swooped down and plucked a chunk of meat from Heisuke's fish.

"Hey, Shinpatsu! Why do you always go after my food?" Heisuke demanded, chagrined.

"Hahahaha! It's all about body size." Shinpachi said, grinning. "Guys with bigger bodies need more to eat."

"Well, I'm still a growing boy, so I gotta eat more!" Heisuke said, aiming for Shinpachi's fish.

"Too slow!" Shinpachi taunted him, swooping the whole fish up out of harm's way with his chopsticks before Heisuke's could touch it. "Hwomp!" He shoved the fish into his mouth, taking off the head with one bite, smiling as he chewed.

"You're eating it as is!\_?" Heisuke asked incredulously. "At least spit out the bones! That's disgusting." Shinpachi exhaled as he finished chewing. All that was left was the tail fins.

"Want this?" He asked Heisuke, smirking.

"No, I don't!" Heisuke retorted tartly.

"It's like this every time." Sano said as the two men continued to argue in the background. "Sorry for all the ruckus." He told the girls.

"Not all." Chizuru said, smiling. "Everyone eating together, being lively, is fun."

"Pfft! Yeah, this is how it should be." Sumiko laughed, grinning, as she watched Heisuke and Shinpachi's antics. "It reminds me of whenever my mother used to make a hotpot. She'd set out on the table, and my father and I would battle each other to see who could get the most meat, until she got fed up and scolded us for making a mess."

"You finally smiled." Sano said, causing them to glance back at him. Most of their smiles had been somewhat strained since they came here, but these were genuinely happy. "You two should always smile like that. We aren't gonna do you no wrong." He reassured them with a smile of his own. The two girls exchanged a glance.

"Okay." They said, nodding. Chizuru smiled softly.

'I may have misunderstood the Shinsengumi somewhat.' Sumiko thought as the door slid open to reveal a troubled looking Inoue-san.

"Can I have a minute, everyone?" He asked. "We have received a message from Hijikata, who is in Osaka." He announced with the letter in his hand. "It seems that, in the course of his duties, San'nan-san incurred great injury."

"Eh?" They all gasped with concern.

"And? How is San'nan-san?" Shinpachi asked anxiously.

"The letter said his wounds are deep, but the injury is to his left arm." Inoue informed them regretfully. "It will be difficult for him to hold a sword, but his life is not in danger."

"Oh, good." Chizuru said, sighing with relief, while Sumiko frowned slightly.

"It \_ain't\_ good!" Heisuke said shortly.

"Huh?" Chizuru said, confused.

"A sword cannot be easily wielded with one arm." Saito explained.  
"San'nan-san may never hold a blade again."

"And even if he can, his reflexes will probably never be the same."  
Sumiko added with regret on San'nan-san's behalf.

"!" Chizuru gasped, appalled, now that she realized the gravity of the situation.

"Now then, I have something to discuss with Kondo-san." Inoue said, excusing himself, as he closed the door and left.

"If it comes down to it, all we can do is have him take the medicine or something, huh?" Okita said somberly.

'Medicine?' Sumiko thought, furrowing her brow slightly. If they really had a medicine capable of saving San'nan-san's arm, then why did Okita look and sound like he was talking about a death sentence.

"Don't talk foolishness." Shinpachi said grimly. "We can't have a higher-up as one of the Shinsengumi."

"Huh?" Chizuru said as both girls furrowed their brows in confusion.

"Isn't San'nan-san the Shinsengumi's deputy commander?" Sumiko asked.

"Uh, wellâ€|" Shinpachi said, realizing too late that he had probably said too much.

"You've got it wrong." Heisuke said. "The word Shinsengumi means 'newly selected corps', right? For the Shinsengumi we're talkin' about, the 'sen' part meansâ€|"

\_"Heisuke!\_" Sano shouted sternly, cutting him off, as he launched himself at the younger man and sent him flying with a mean right hook.

\_"Ah! \_Heisuke-kun!" Chizuru screamed as both girls were startled by the sudden and violent outburst. Shinpachi held an arm out to stop Sumiko when she started to move to help him.

"Owâ€|" Heisuke groaned in pain as he held a hand to his aching jaw.

"That's going too far, Sano!" Shinpachi said. "Try thinking of Heisuke, and the girls as well." Sano exhaled and the tension left his shoulders as he calmed down and realized Shinpachi was right.

"I-I'm sorry." Sano apologized to Heisuke.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, too." Heisuke said, still holding his cheek. It

felt like it was starting to swell up. "Butâ€¦ Jeez, Sano-san, you're quick to take a swing."

"Chizuru-chan. Sumiko-chan. This just now was the limit of what you're allowed to hear." Shinpachi said gravely. "I'm sure you're curious, but I want you to ask nothing more."

"Butâ€¦!" Chizuru started to object, when Sumiko placed a hand on her shoulder and shook her head, silently telling her to let it go for now. It obviously wasn't safe for them to know too much.

"The 'Shinsengumi' Heisuke mentionedâ€¦ are some pretty pitiful children." Okita said solemnly.

'What in the worldâ€¦ is going on hereâ€¦?' Sumiko wondered, furrowing her brow in concern and confusion. Just what did they get themselves intoâ€¦?

## 6. Small Miracles

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 6: Small Miracles<br>\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>The girls were being escorted to breakfast by Saito, when Inoue came rushing over to meet them.<p>

"Miyagawa-kun!" He called out urgently, panting. "You said you were a doctor, yes? Could you please come take a look at Takeda-kun? He was experiencing some sharp abdominal pains yesterday, but his condition suddenly worsened overnight."

"What are the symptoms?" Sumiko asked, putting on her business face.

"Aside from the abdominal pain, he has a fever and has been vomiting ever since he woke up."

"Take me to him." Sumiko said gravely. "Chizuru, can you get me my kit? I'll probably need my tools."

"Yes!" Chizuru said, darting back to their room to retrieve the small medical kit Sumiko had packed in case of emergencies, with Saito on her heels.

â€"âˆžâ€"

"Does it hurt here?" Sumiko asked Takeda, gingerly applying some light pressure near his bellybutton with her fingers.

"Ah! It hurts!" He cried out, gritting his teeth in pain.

"This is badâ€¦" Sumiko said, furrowing her brow. He also had abdominal swelling and said he hadn't passed gas in a long time. His symptoms were all classic signs of appendicitis. "I'll have to

perform an appendectomy."

"A what?" Inoue asked.

"His appendix is infected. I'll need to perform surgery to remove it." She explained. "If I don't, it could burst and leak toxins into his body. He'll die if we don't act soon."

"Eh!\_" Takeda exclaimed, understandably panicked after hearing such a grim diagnosis.

"Calm down, Takeda-san." She said soothingly. "I'm going to take good care of you. I've done this before." She glanced up as Chizuru entered the room with Saito. "Ah, good." She said, relieved to have her tools, as Chizuru handed the box to her. "Inoue-san, I'll need lots of clean cloths"as many as you can find"and lots of boiled water, and a cup of plain water." She instructed urgently

"Hai!" He said, rushing off to get them without hesitation.

"Chizuru, are you up to being my assistant?" Sumiko asked, concerned. She knew Chizuru didn't really like the sight of blood, and there would be a lot of it.

"I, uh" Chizuru replied hesitantly, looking uneasy. She wanted to help, but

"It's all right if you can't." Sumiko said understandingly. "Then, Saito-san, when Inoue-san gets back, I'll require your assistance. I'll need you to hand me my instruments as I ask for them and help me keep the sight of the operation clean. Can you do that?"

"Hai." He said calmly, kneeling down beside her, as she removed her surgical instruments, disinfectant strength alcohol, and some tsÅ«sensen anesthetic. "These are" He asked curiously.

"Right, I guess I'd better explain what they are so you'll know what to grab." Sumiko said as Inoue returned with several more men, bearing everything she asked for. "Excellent." She said, adding the proper dose of tsÅ«sensen paste to the cup of water. "Give this to him to drink. He must drink all of it, or it won't be as affective." She instructed Inoue before turning back to Saito so she could explain what everything she would be needing was. She paused when she noticed all the others were still standing around. "What are you waiting for?" She asked, frowning. "Get out! You're contaminating the room!" She scolded them as she pulled out two face masks for her and Saito to cover their mouths with. "Shoo!"

Chizuru smiled wryly and laughed nervously as she helped Inoue-san herd the disgruntled men out of the room so Sumiko and Saito could perform the operation in peace. Once everyone who wasn't needed were out, she shut the door and breathed a sigh. Sumiko always got really bossy whenever she was in 'work' mode.

"Don't worry, Inoue-san." Chizuru said when she noticed how deeply concerned his expression was. "Sumiko-san is very skilled. Although she has only been studying under my father for two years, she already has a lot of practice performing very difficult surgeries on animals, and she knows even more Western medicine techniques than he does."

Why, she even managed to save a horse from going lame, even though everyone thought it would never be able to run again and would have to be put down."

"Ah, is that so?" Inoue asked, impressed. Perhaps they should have her look at San'nan-san's arm when he returned.

"^"

\*\*Three hours later\*\*

Sumiko let out a tired sigh as she and Saito finally finished closing the patient up and came outside to let the others know the prognosis. They both had blood on them. Saving lives was hard work.

"As of right now, his vitals are stable, and the surgery seems to have been a success, but someone should stay with Takeda-san and monitor him until he regains consciousness. I need to clean up and take a nap, but don't hesitate to come get me if you think something's wrong." Sumiko said, wiping her bloody hands off on a clean cloth. "I'd appreciate it if you could sit with him, Chizuru. You know what to look for."

"Yes, of course." Chizuru said determinedly, nodding in understanding.

"Ah, so tired." Sumiko yawned as she walked away, followed by Saito, who still needed to keep an eye on her in addition to washing up, too. "Sometimes it feels like your own life is being drained right into the patient!"

"^"

Fortunately, there were no complications, and Sumiko ended up sleeping the rest of the day away. When she woke up again, it was already time for dinner. They were eating with Kondo-san today since he wanted to thank Sumiko for helping Takeda.

"Let's eat!" Everyone said in unison after sitting down to their meal.

"Shinpatsu-san, I'll take that!" Heisuke said, aiming for a slice of the other man's favorite side dish.

"Agh! I was gonna save that for last!" Shinpachi exclaimed incredulously, mourning his loss. "Bastard, in that case!"

"Ah! What're you doin'?" Heisuke asked, trying to guard his food, as Shinpachi launched a counter-attack for revenge.

"What do you mean 'what are you doin' '\_!\_?' Shinpachi asked incredulously. "You ate my food!"

"Where do you get off? You're always eatin' my food!" Heisuke retorted.

"You're a dwarf of a man, Heisuke! Bringin' up some old topic like that!"

"It ain't old, it was this morning. This morning! You ate three of my



sardines! Bastard!"

"Stop it, both of you!" Inoue scolded them, finally snapping. "Miyagawa-san went through quite an ordeal on our behalf today, and Yukimura-kun is shocked, no doubt."

"Eh?" Heisuke and Shinpachi said, pausing their fight to glance at the two girls.

"Ehehehâ€|" Chizuru laughed nervously while Sumiko calmly sipped her tea, nonplused. Why was he bringing them into this?

"Oh, that's right! I heard from Saito you saved someone's life today." Sano said, smiling, impressed.

"It's nothing." Sumiko said. "I was just doing my job as a doctor."

"Still, we owe you our thanks." Kondo said, smiling. "Without you, Takeda-sanâ€|" "

The door slid open, revealing Hijikata-san in his uniform.

"I'm Back." He announced formally.

"Ah, Toshi." Kondo said.

"Hijikata-san." Okita greeted the grim-faced man as he entered the room. They were all relieved to see that he had managed to return safely, but their expressions fell slightly when San'nan followed him into the room with his injured arm heavily bandaged and in a sling.

"Vice-commander. Deputy-commander. Excellent work." Saito praised them calmly as they sat down beside Kondo.

"Yeah." Hijikata answered, setting down his sword.

"Welcome back, San'nan-san." Okita said.

"I have returned." He replied politely.

"Good work." Kondo said. "How is the wound to your arm?"

"As you can see, I suffered defeat." San'nan replied humbly with a wan smile. He glanced around the room and saw the worry and concern on everyone's faces as they stared at him. "It's alright. It's not as bad as it looks, so please, don't worry." He said trying to reassure them. "Excuse me." He bowing towards Kondo before heading for the door.

"San'nan-san! What about dinner?" Heisuke called after him, concerned.

"That's fine." San'nan paused outside the doorway. "I'm somewhat tired, so I'll be going to my room." He said, shutting the door.

"Hijikata-san. About San'nan-san's woundâ€|" how is it really?" Okita asked after a few moments.

"I can say nothing." Hijikata said solemnly. "What are you doing?" he demanded, furrowing his brow as he fixed Sumiko and Chizuru with a sharp stare.

"Huh?" Chizuru said as Sumiko furrowed her brow slightly in confusion.

"Who allowed the two of you to leave your room and dine here?" He asked them sternly.

"Uh, Toshi," Kondo said a little nervously, "I sort ofâ€"

"I invited them." Heisuke spoke up. "To come eat here."

"No, it was me." Shinpachi said.

"I was the oneâ€|" Inoue chimed in nervously.

"It was \_me\_ who said it." Sano stated carelessly.

"You allâ€|" Hijikata said, frowning, as he glanced around at all of them. "How reckless."

"Where's the harm? It's just to eat." Heisuke said. "They promised they wouldn't escape, and haven't tried to these past couple of weeks."

"It's only a couple of weeks." Hijikata reminded him, furrowing his brow with disapproval of how lax they had become.

"If you're that worried about them, \_you\_ should watch them." Okita told Hijikata. "Around the clock."

"What?" Hijikata demanded in a low voice, glancing at him. Okita smirked slightly as he watched the older man out the corner of his eye, noting that the vice-commander didn't seem quite as opposed to the idea as he had before, despite the indifferent façade he had adopted.

"Toshi, come on." Kondo said. "Can't we at least give them permission to eat here. After all, they've been very helpful."

"Kondo-san." Hijikata said, sighing. "If you're that naïve, the group's leadership will fall into disarray."

"Ahâ€|" Kondo said, smiling wryly, as he rubbed the back of his neck. He got scolded againâ€|

"U-Um... I thinkâ€| maybe we should just go back to our room." Chizuru said nervously, reaching to pick up her tray.

"Only to eat." Hijikata said, causing both girls to stop and look up at him.

'Hijikata-sanâ€|' They both thought, surprised to find themselves being let off the hook so easily.

"Well, I guess I'll eat something, too." Hijikata said more casually, finally allowing himself to relax a little.

"Ah. I'll get a tray for you." Inoue said.

"All right, Chizuru, Sumiko! Now everyone can keep eating together, huh?" Heisuke said cheerfully.

"Hai!" Chizuru said brightly. Hijikata noticed a small smile graced Sumiko's lips as she took another bite.

"Anyway, has San'nan seen a doctor yet?" The older girl asked, concerned by the way San'nan-san had just walked off without eating anything. "Do you want me to examine him?"

"You?" Hijikata asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, yes, that would be most appreciated!" Kondo said, lighting up. "Ah, that's right!" he said, turning to face Hijikata. "You've only just returned, so you haven't heard yet, but today Sumiko-san saved Takeda's life."

"What?" Hijikata asked, surprised to hear such news. He glanced questioningly at Sumiko.

"He had a case of appendicitis, so I operated with Saito-san's help. Then Chizuru and Inoue-san sat with him for several hours and monitored his vital signs." Sumiko explained calmly. "So far, Takeda-san has been making a smooth recovery. I was hoping to check on his progress again after dinner."

"I heard earlier from Yukimura-kun that you were able to cure a lame horse!" Inoue said excitedly. "If it's Miyagawa-san, you might be able to do something for San'nan-san."

"What, seriously!?" Shinpachi asked excitedly.

"That's amazing, Sumiko!" Heisuke exclaimed.

"No, hold on!" Sumiko said quickly, raising her hands defensively. "There's a huge difference between mending a horse's broken ankle and a deep laceration on a human arm! I haven't even seen his wound yet. I have to see the extent of the damage before I can be sure whether or not there's anything more that I can do for him." She explained pragmatically, trying to calm them down before they got their hopes too high only to possibly have them crushed later on. "I've heard the wound was deep. Did it require stitches?" She asked Hijikata.

"We bound the wound tightly with bandages. It took several hours for the bleeding to stop." Hijikata replied, furrowing his brow slightly as the memory.

"Has it already closed, then?" She asked.

"Not completely." He said.

"Hmm— well, as long as it's not bleeding heavily anymore, then his life shouldn't be in any immediate danger, but it sounds like it will need stitches. At any rate, the wound should be cleaned properly with an antiseptic." Sumiko said thoughtfully. "I'll have to mix more painkiller for Takeda-san soon, so I'll make some for San'nan-san, too, while I'm at it. It will help him sleep better. It's important

that he eat well and get plenty of rest until he recovers."

"If it's within your power to help him, then please do so." Hijikata said solemnly.

"I understand." Sumiko said, nodding. "I'll do my best."

## 7. Seeds of Discord

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 7: Seeds of Discord<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Previously:<strong>

\_"Only to eat." Hijikata said, causing both girls to stop and look up at him.\_

\_'Hijikata-san'\_' They both thought, surprised to find themselves being let off the hook so easily.\_

\_"Well, I guess I'll eat something, too." Hijikata said more casually, finally allowing himself to relax a little.\_

\_"Ah. I'll get a tray for you." Inoue said.\_

\_"All right, Chizuru, Sumiko! Now everyone can keep eating together, huh?" Heisuke said cheerfully.\_

\_"Hai!" Chizuru said brightly. Hijikata noticed a small smile graced Sumiko's lips as she took another bite.\_

\* \* \*

><p>In fact, it wasn't 'everyone' although Sumiko had indeed done the best she could to treat his injured arm, San'nan-san started to talk very little. During the day he was quiet and withdrawn, but at night Sumiko and Chizuru could see him practicing trying to swing his sword with his one good hand, despite Sumiko's advice to take it easy and rest. The look on his face while he practiced It was as if he was frustrated irritated with himself. Sumiko understood why. She could tell there would probably be some lasting nerve damage due to the placement of the wound. She had tried to reassure that even if there was, it would be very minor, and she hadn't been sugar-coating it either. But if he kept this up, it would only get worse. She really wanted to tell him off, but the last time she had tried scolding him for not taking better care of himself, he had essentially kicked her out and become even more stubborn about his situation. Sumiko furrowed her brow and frowned. It was frustrating.<p>

â€"âˆšâ€"

"Good morning." Chizuru greeted Okita and Saito when she found them working in the kitchen.

" 'Morning, Chizuru-chan." Okita returned her greeting while Saito tested the taste of the dish he was making. "Oh? It's unusual to see you without Sumiko-san around."

"She said she wanted to check on Takeda-san's progress. Okita-san, you and Saito-san prepare the meals?" She asked, surprised.

"It's not as if it's just us." Saito said. "Everyone takes turns making meals."

"San'nan-san said he'll eat in his room again." Heisuke announced as he joined them.

" 'Eat'? His chopsticks barely touch the food." Okita said, frowning.

"Is that so?" Chizuru asked, concerned.

"If he don't eat his food, he won't get better, huh?" Heisuke said, sighing. "And Sumiko-san said he won't let her examine his arm eitherâ€|"

"Umâ€|" Chizuru began.

"I've allowed you to eat in the hall," Hijikata said from behind, pausing as he passed when he heard her voice, "but I don't recall letting you wander around at will."

Oh! Good morning." Chizuru said, bowing quickly. "I thought maybe I could help with something."

"Don't concern yourself where it's not needed." Hijikata replied coolly as he turned to walk away.

"Um! Would you mind letting me take care of San'nan-san's food?" She called out after him. Hijikata stopped and glanced back at her.

"Let \_you\_?" He asked.

"Yes. At my father's side, I also cared for injured patientsâ€|" Chizuru said quietly.

"Don't bother." Hijikata said. "If you're not careful around him, you'll make him more obstinate."

"Why not let her?" Sumiko said as she walked up.

"Not you, tooâ€|" He said, frowning.

"What? I had to check on my patient. It would be irresponsible of me to just ignore him." She said reasonably. "Anyway, I think it would be good to have Chizuru try to take care of San'nan-san. He won't listen to any of us, and her bedside manner is much better than mine. My people skills aren't exactly the best. Part of the reason why I specialize in animals is because my first instinct upon seeing an animal is to walk up and say hello, whereas my first instinct upon seeing a person is to avoid eye contact and hope they go away."

"Haha! I can see that happening." Okita laughed, smirking, as she shot him a disgruntled look. "But she's right." He said more seriously. "He's barely eating, no matter who brings it to him. We should let Chizuru give it a try."

"Yeah. At this rate, San'nan-san's just going to collapse." Heisuke added.

"All right, fine." Hijikata said, finally giving in. "Do as you like." He told Chizuru before turning back to Sumiko. "If you're finished, come with me. I'll take you back to your room."

"Haai." Sumiko replied flatly, following after him as he walked away. She had to take several quick steps to catch up with him. "â€| You don't have to beat yourself up over it, so much you know. Sometimes, things just happen that are beyond our control." She said after awhile, causing him to glance at her, slightly caught off guard.

"How did youâ€|?"

"Your brow's been creased even more than usual lately. There's a guilt crease in there." She glanced up at him with a small but confident smile. "Don't worry. I'm sure Chizuru will manage to get him to eat something, she always does."

"â€|" Hijikata said, staring down at her for a moment longer before looking away. "For someone who claims to have no people skillsâ€| you're very perceptive, aren't you?" He asked, furrowing his brow.

"It's an important part of survival. Does it bother you?" She asked.

"This is your room." Hijikata said instead of answering, opening the door for her. Sumiko sighed.

"You're not very friendly either, 'demon Vice-commander'." She commented as she stepped inside.

"Try not to wander around without permission anymore." He said firmly.

"Hai. Hai." She said, leaning over to pick up a the collection of poems she'd been working on. "Ahâ€|" One fell out and fluttered in the air for a moment before landing at Hijikata's feet.

"This isâ€|" He said, picking it up and reading it. There was only one line written on the page.

\_We think caged birds sing, when indeed they cry.\_

So, that was how she felt about their confinementâ€| She was much more sensitive than she appeared.

"That's a work in progress!" Sumiko said quickly, snatching it back out of his hands. Though she was trying to keep a straight face, he could see that she was blushing out of embarrassment. It was the first time he had ever seen her looking so flustered. He let out a small laugh, causing her to flinch in shock. "Don't laugh at

it!"

"No, I wasn't laughing at you." Hijikata said, surprising her with a small smile. "I also have an interest in poetry."

"Oh." She said. Come to think of it, she might have heard her history teacher mention something like that before. She really should have paid more attention in that class.

"Stay out of trouble." He added again as a parting shot before shutting the door.

Sumiko felt her cheeks. They were hot. She was now blushing for an entirely different reason. That smile had caught her off-guard after having gotten so used to being scowled at all the time.

"That's not playing fair!" She mumbled, flopping down onto her futon so she could bury her red face in the cool pillow. Why did he have to have such lethal good looks and be into poetry!?

"

It wasn't very long before Chizuru came with Heisuke to fetch her for breakfast with the others.

"What's wrong, Chizuru?" Sumiko asked while they walked, concerned, when she saw how down her friend looked.

"I think San'nan-san is upset with me now." Chizuru replied quietly. "He didn't want to eat the food I brought him, either."

"I'm sure you did your best." Sumiko said with a sympathetic smile, letting her know it wasn't her fault.

"Nn." Chizuru said, still looking down, as they entered the dining hall to eat with the others. Sumiko had to be careful not to look at Hijikata or remember that smile as she took her seat.

It was a quiet meal for once. It showed just how worried everyone still was about San'nan's recovery that even Heisuke and Shimpachi weren't cutting up. Out of everyone there, Chizuru seemed the most depressed.

"Chizuru. Come on, cheer up." Heisuke said when he'd had enough of the gloomy atmosphere. "I'll take his lunch to him."

"That's right. Cheer up." Sano said.

"Yes, cheer up, and I'll let you have my pickled plum." Sumiko said, knowing how much she liked them.

"Thank you very much." Chizuru told everyone, but she just wasn't in the mood.

The door slid open, revealing none other than San'nan-san.

"Deputy-commander!" Saito said, surprised, causing everyone else to look up too. San'nan balanced his tray on one hand while he carefully

slid the door shut using his injured one. Sumiko was tempted to scold him for that, but at the moment she was just glad he had finally come out of his room, before he started to mold. They all watched quietly as he carried his tray over to his usual spot and sat down.

"Thank you for the food." He said calmly before picking up a rice-ball, and taking a bit.

"San'nan-san!" Chizuru said, surprised, as they all watched him in amazement, relieved to finally see him eat something.

"Food is apparently best enjoyed in company." San'nan said. Chizuru smiled brightly with relief.

"Yeah. Of course." Kondo said, smiling warmly. Sumiko noticed there were fewer creases in Hijikata's brow now as he watched San'nan eat. She smiled slightly and quietly added her plum to Chizuru's tray.

## 8. A Test of Skill

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 8: A Test of Skill<strong>

\* \* \*

<p><strong>May, 1864<strong>

Little by little, Hijikata had started to allow the girls to do more to help around as the months passed and it became evident that they weren't spies of any kind and could be trusted not to run away. Sumiko had fallen into place as the group's emergency medic, but she usually spent her time helping Chizuru with a few domestic chores. Today, they were doing some of the wash in a big tub beside the well, while Saito practiced his swing in the courtyard, and Okita lounged on the porch, watching. Sumiko glanced up at the clear, blue sky for a moment as she listened to the singing cicadas. It was warm, beautiful summer day.

"Got something you want to say." Saito asked, causing her to look back down and see that Chizuru had been staring at him.

"Uh, well!" Chizuru said, dropping the wet kimono she had been working on back into the bucket, as she stood up. "I thought maybe we could get around to looking for my fatherâ€|"

"Not possible." Saito replied bluntly, turning away as he raised his sword again. "There are many out there who would do us harm. We don't have enough men to provide you with protection as well."

"Oh. I seeâ€|" Chizuru said, looking down.

"Chizuruâ€|" Sumiko said.

"You could always come with us as we go out on rounds, though." Okita suggested.



"Really!?" Chizuru asked excitedly, immediately perking up. "Then, please, may I come with you?"

"But, doing the rounds is life or death. Screw up and one of our own dies. At the very least, unless you can vouch for your own safety, we can't take you with us." Okita said.

"I'm prepared to defend myself!" Chizuru said determinedly. "I've been to a dojo to learn the short sword."

"And I've learned some kendo from my father." Sumiko said.

"In that case!" Saito said, pausing after his last swing. "Allow me to test you."

Chizuru was first up. Sumiko sat on the porch next to Okita to watch while she waited her turn.

"There's no need to hold back. Attack me however you like." Saito instructed Chizuru calmly once they were in position.

"B-But!" Chizuru said hesitantly.

"Is that short sword at your hip simply an ornament?" Saito asked.

"That's not it at all!" Chizuru protested. "Saito-san, if stabbed by a blade, you would die." She said seriously, concerned for his safety.

"Pfft! Hahaha!" Okita burst out laughing, while Sumiko smiled wryly and sweat-dropped. She was pretty sure the one who should be more concerned about their own safety wasn't Saito! "Telling Hajime-kun to his face you might kill him is friggin' awesome. You rock!" He said, slapping his leg.

"It's nothing to laugh about, is it!?" Chizuru asked indignantly.

"But if you show us what you can do, we'd be more inclined to let you go outdoors." Okita said.

"If you don't wish to use the blade, strike with the back of the sword." Saito told her. Chizuru looked from him to her short sword and drew it with a determined and serious expression on her face. She flipped it around, readjusting her grip so that she was holding the blade reversed, as he had suggested.

"If you please." She said, indicating she was ready to start. Chizuru took a breath and charged. "Yaaah!" She shouted as she raised her sword, bringing it down to attack.

\_SWISH.\_ CLANG!

Chizuru furrowed her brow as she turned on her heel to launch a follow up attack just as she had been trained to do in the dojo, but immediately froze when she realized the Saito's blade was already pressed lightly to her neck. Her eyes widened in shock as she stared up at the calm and collected samurai. Saito lowered his sword and

slid it back into its sheath. Sumiko let out a low whistle of appreciation.

"Wh-What justâ€¦" Chizuru stuttered, still stunned. Okita laughed as he hopped off the porch and picked Chizuru's sword up off the ground.

"Surprised?" He asked. "Hajime-kun is an expert at the quick draw." He held her sword up for her to see.

"Huh? Huh\_!\_?" Chizuru gasped, astonished, when she realized what he was holding, looking down at her own empty hands. "No way! That one secondâ€¦!"

"You mean, you didn't notice?" Sumiko asked, sweat-dropping.

"If Hajime-kun were serious, you'd be dead." Okita told Chizuru, returning her sword.

"Thank your teacher." Saitou said, looking directly at Chizuru. "Your sword shows no hesitation."

"Huh?" Chizuru said, surprised. Didn't she just fail miserably?

"Your skill is such that you'll at least be of no inconvenience to us outdoors." He said.

"Hajime-kun gave you the okay, huh?" Okita said smiling. "That's pretty incredible."

"Good job, Chizuru!" Sumiko cheered, patting her on the back. "Let's see how I'll fare against him."

"You'd better come over here." Okita told Chizuru waving her over to the porch, while Saito and Sumiko got into position. Sumiko drew her sword and held hers reversed, too, intending to use the back of the blade to strike as well.

"If you please." Sumiko said, signaling she as ready to start. For a moment she just stared at Saito, but then she suddenly launched herself forward with great speed. With the same speed and accuracy as before, Saito drew his sword. His eyes widened in surprise when instead of trying to block it, she ducked so low, her sword was almost touching the ground, and she shot straight past him, pulling herself up into a standing position as she spun around to face him when he turned to strike again, effectively blocking his sword with hers. There was an intense moment of silence as two of them stared at each other, searching for any signs of weakness.

"Very good." Saito said as they both simultaneously backed down. "It would seem you had an excellent teacher as well."

"A-Amazingâ€¦" Chizuru said, stunned. She hadn't realized just how good Sumiko was until now.

"Wow." Okita said smirking. "I wouldn't mind sparring with you sometime."

"Thanks, but I'm not sure that's such a good ideaâ€¦ I wouldn't feel

safe with you." Sumiko replied frankly, sweat-dropping. There was a predatory gleam in his eye. Okita would probably rip her to shreds. "What really helped was that I got to see Saito-san's moves ahead of time. I knew I probably wouldn't be able to block his first strike without losing my sword, so I just avoided it all together and waited for the one with less momentum behind it."

"Uh, umâ€¦" Chizuru said hesitantly, hoping they hadn't changed their mind about her after seeing how skilled her friend was.

"We'll ask the vice-commander to let you two accompany us on our rounds.

"Thank you very much!" Chizuru exclaimed happily, sharing a triumphant grin with Sumiko.

"But if you try to escape, or get in the way of our roundsâ€¦ We'll kill you." Okita added with a sly smirk, narrowing his eyes slightly at them.

"Okay!" Chizuru replied enthusiastically, smiling brightly.

"Yeah, I believe you." Sumiko said, smiling wryly, as she let out nervous laugh. Okita smiled in amusement and turned to follow Saito inside.

"Thank you very much!" Chizuru called after them as both girls bowed to show their appreciation, though Sumiko felt they could've done without the threat.

â€œâˆžâ€œ"

"I grant you permission to go outdoors." Hijikata told the girls later after talking with Saito and Okita, though he didn't look too thrilled about it.

"Thank you very much!" They both replied in unison, glad it had all worked out. Now they could finally do what they had come here for.

"Accompany the officers patrolling the city. Make sure you obey the commanding officer." Hijikata said firmly.

"Hai!" They replied obediently, excited to finally be going out.

"Souji. Heisuke. You're on patrol today, yes?" Hijikata asked.

"I'm ditching them if we encounter rogue samurai. Okay?" Okita teased, smirking.

"Huh?" Chizuru gasped while Sumiko deadpanned at the bad joke, if it was a jokeâ€¦

"That's no excuse!" Hijikata said sternly, glaring at him in disapproval. Okita just laughed, having successfully ruffled their feathers. "Those bastards from Choshu are acting up." Hijikata said, turning his attention back to the girls. "Normally, this would be no time to let you outdoors, but we've received word that someone resembling Koudou-san has been spotted.

"My father?" Chizuru asked excitedly as she and Sumiko perked up at this news.

"I could postpone your release, but it would do nothing to help find your father."

"Thank you very much!" The girls said, smiling gratefully as they bowed.

## 9. The Ikedaya Incident

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 9: The Ikedaya Incident<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>While Chizuru went with Okita's group, Sumiko went with Heisuke's, hoping they might have a better chance of finding her father if they split up to cover more ground. Unfortunately, Sumiko didn't seem to be having much luck. Everyone she asked either had no idea what she was taking about or hurried away to avoid talking to her because they had seen she was with the Shinsengumi.<p>

"You guys aren't very popular, are you?" She asked Heisuke, smiling wryly.

"No. Unfortunately some stuff happened, and we ended up getting a bad reputation because of a few rotten apples." He explained, sighing.

"Must be tough." She said sympathetically.

"Ah! My baby!" A woman suddenly cried. They immediately stopped and whipped their heads around to see what was wrong. Heisuke didn't see any baby, but Sumiko must have, because she took off like shot, diving in front of a speeding cart, and rolling out of harms way just in time as she scooped something small up off the ground and cradled it in her arms.

"Phew!" Sumiko said, sighing in relief. "That was dangerousâ€|" 'I guess some things never change no matter what era you're inâ€|" She thought, smiling wryly.

"Here you go, ma'am." Sumiko said with a charming smile, handing the sweet little calico kitten in her arms over to the frantic woman that came rushing over to reclaim her 'baby'.

"H-How coolâ€|" Heisuke said as he and his men stared at her from across the lane with wide eyes. It was a little extreme to go that far for just a cat, but that didn't change the fact that it had been pretty damn impressive. "â€|" So manly."

Sumiko waved goodbye as the woman thanked her and walked away.

"What?" She asked, stopping short when she noticed how they were all staring at her.

"Can we call you 'Aniki'?" Several of the men asked excitedly.

"Huh?" Sumiko asked, feeling extremely confused.

"You guys!" Heisuke shouted indignantly on her behalf. "Get back to work! We're supposed to be patrolling."

"Uh, what just happened?" Sumiko asked hesitantly.

"I think you just turned half of division eight into your followers." He said, sighing as he shook his head.

"What? Why?" She asked, flinching in shock.

"You're too manly for your own good." He told her, patting her sympathetically on the back.

"That's quite the accomplishment." San'nin said once they had all returned to headquarters and gathered together for a discussion. And, no, he wasn't talking about Sumiko's daring rescue of the cat. Apparently, Okita's group had gotten into a tussle with some rough characters on their side of town. Hijikata was in the process of interrogating the guy they had arrested as they spoke. "You confiscated the ammunition that had been transported to the shop, and captured Shuntaro Furutaka, Choshu spy and crime boss."

"We really got lucky, huh?" Okita asked.

"It's no laughing matter." San'nin said seriously. "You received word the shop owner was a Choshu spy, yet you continued to let him be, did you not?"

"You don't think bad about Shimada-kun and Yamazaki-kun?" Heisuke asked, pointing the two men sitting just behind himself and Shinpachi.

"Please, pay no mind to us." Yamazaki said.

"We'd kept up our watch over the store, but things were at a standstill. It was thanks to Okita-san and the others that we were able to catch Furutaka."

"In hindsight, that is." San'nin said.

"How admirable of you all." Shinpachi said. "In contrast, Souji is..."

"The fault is mine." Chizuru said, speaking up on Okita's behalf.

"Chizuru?" Sumiko said, surprised. Why would it be her fault?

"When I heard my father had been seen, I went to the shop without

thinking of the consequences." Chizuru explained. Sumiko nodded in understanding. Yeah, she could see that happening.

"The responsibility for your lack of supervision falls to Okita-kun." San'nan said.

"About that?" Hijikata said, entering the room. "I allowed her to leave, so I am also responsible. They're not the only ones to blame."

"Hijikata-san. Has Furutaka said anything?" Sano asked as Hijikata took a seat. Hijikata scanned the faces of all those present before answering.

"They'll set fire to Kyoto on a day the wind is strong, and take the emperor away to Choshu." He stated.

"Set fire to Kyoto!?" Kondo exclaimed incredulously, appalled.

"That just means they'll kidnap the emperor, right?" Heisuke said. "They talk about revering the emperor, but they don't respect him at all!"

"If they wanna set fire to the city, those Choshu guys have got a screw loose!" Shimpachi added.

"They're panicking now that Furutaka has been captured." Hijikata said. "They're sure to meet tonight to come up with a course of action."

"Where would the Choshu hold a meeting?" Kondo asked.

"Going by what we've seen, I think it'd be at either the Shikokuya or Ikedaya." Shimada said.

'Ikedaya' they don't mean' Sumiko thought, struggling to keep her pokerface on when everything suddenly clicked into place. 'That can't be happening \_tonight\_, can it!\_?'

"All right. Send word to the Aizu clan and the Shogun's representative." Kondo said. "Toshi. Assemble the troops!"

"Mmn." Hijikata said, nodding in approval.

"^"

"Is this all the men we can mobilize?" Hijikata asked once everyone able to come had donned their uniform haoris and assembled in formation.

"I'm very sorry. If not for my injury, I could" San'nan said regretfully.

"No. We need you to keep watch over things here, San'nan-kun." Kondo said.

"It's too bad they can't use him at a time like this." Sano said quietly.

"It seems he'll be avoiding combat for awhile." Saito said.

"He has to if he wants to have any chance of that arm healing properly." Sumiko added grimly. He had pushed himself too much already, that's why it was so slow to heal now.

"Still no movement from Aizu or the representative?" Hijikata asked Inoue.

"We have yet to receive any word." He replied.

"Tch. They won't act without definitive proof, huh?" Hijikata said, irritated but unsurprised to hear that the bureaucrats were dragging their feet, as always. "Kondo-san. Let's move out."

"But we still don't know if it's the Shikokuya or Ikedaya." Kondo said.

"They apparently used the Ikedaya quite often. It's hard to imagine they'd use the same place on the night that Furutaka is captured." San'nan said. "Thus, it's probably safe to assume it's the Shikokuya."

"Still, we can't rule out the Ikedaya." Kondo said.

"Fine, we'll split into two teams." Hijikata said. "I'll go to the Shikokuya."

"Then, Toshi, you take twenty-four men." Kondo said, standing up.

"Kondo-san, you'll only take ten? That's reckless." Hijikata objected, concerned for his leader.

"I agree." Sumiko said, unable to keep quiet any longer, despite her general policy of non-interference when it came to major events that could affect the timeline. "Please take more people with you." She couldn't just let him walk into there knowing the Ikedaya would be full of enemies without saying anything. Kondo smiled.

"In exchange, I'll take Souji, Nagakura, and Heisuke." He said, glancing at the three captains.

"Understood." Hijikata said with a slight smirk. Those three should help make up for what he lacked in numbers.

"If it turns out ours is the one, come back us up." Kondo told him.

"Mmn." Hijikata said, nodding in understanding.

â€"â^žâ€"

Sumiko and Chizuru stood next to San'nan-san at the gate as they watched the troops head out with Kondo and his group in the lead.

"If it were me," Hijikata said lowly, walking up beside them, "I'd attack the headquarters while it's shorthanded."

"I agree." San'nan said. "There are many with grudges against us."

"Everything else, I leave to you." Hijikata told him before glancing at Sumiko. "Be prepared. We'll need you waiting on standby to treat the wounded." He said to her before dashing off to catch up with the rest of the men.

"Mm. Be careful." She said as they watched him leave.

~~~~~

It was too quiet. The headquarters were virtually empty. After making sure her medical kit was completely packed and ready to go, Sumiko joined Chizuru and San'nan while they waited to receive further news or orders. She had just barely had time to sit, when Yamazaki burst into the room, dressed like a ninja.

'I knew it!'

 Sumiko thought.

"Deputy-commander! The location is Ikedaya." Yamazaki informed San'nan. The deputy-commander furrowed his brow.

"How careless of me." He said, scolding himself. "I misjudged."

"Does Hijikata-san's group know yet?" Sumiko asked, concerned. She knew the Shinsengumi would come out on top in the end, but it didn't stop her from worrying about their new friends.

"No. I will inform vice-commander Hijikata at the Shikokuya at once." Yamazaki said.

"I'll start heading to the Ikedaya." Sumiko said. "Kondo-san may have to go in before backup arrives. They might need medical assistance soon."

"Thank you. Time is of the essence." San'nan said gravely. "Also, Yukimura-kun."

"Yes?" Chizuru asked.

"You go with Yamazaki-kun as well, please." He said.

"Huh? You want me to?" She asked, surprised.

"Pardon me, but I can convey a message on my own." Yamazaki said.

"We don't know what could happen." San'nan said. "To ensure the message is delivered, two is better than one."

"Understood." Yamazaki replied dutifully.

"Yukimura-kun. You'll go, won't you?" He asked Chizuru.

"Hai." Chizuru replied determinedly.

~~~~~



"Miyagawa Sumiko and Yukimura Chizuru, was it?" Yamazaki asked as the three of them ran from headquarters together towards the inns. "Unfortunately, I can't guarantee your safety."

"Hai!" Chizuru said in between breaths.

"We understand." Sumiko said, furrowing her brow, when she caught sight of the group of men coming from the opposite direction. They were all armed and probably ronin.

"You have business with the Shinsengumi headquarters?" Yamazaki asked as they halted to confront the men blocking the road.

"Uh, no. Nothin' at all." The foremost man said shiftily. He and his men seemed nervous, like they were about to do something they knew they shouldn't.

"Yukimura-kun." Yamazaki said quietly, furrowing his brow, as he prepared to draw his sword. Sumiko did the same, preparing herself for what was about to happen next. "No matter what happens, you \_must \_make it down this road. Got it?" Right now it was most important that they made sure they got the message to Hijikata, or it would all be over.

"H-Hai." Chizuru whispered, glancing at the two of them.

"Bastard!" The man who had answered suddenly shouted as he drew his sword and charged at Yamazaki. Yamazaki quickly drew his sword and blocked the attack.

"Chizuru, go!" Sumiko urged her, drawing her sword as the rest of the ronin drew theirs. "Yaaah!" She yelled, charging forward to backup Yamazaki and carve a safe path for her friend.

And thus, a long, arduous night of battle began.

## 10. The Flower That Blooms In Twilight

Author's note: Special thanks to 'Anonymous' for actually reviewing! This one's for you ;)

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 10: The Flower That Blooms In Twilight<strong>

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><p><strong>June, 1864<strong>

Chizuru panted heavily as she ran with all her might towards the Shikokuya to deliver her message to Hijikata-san. She had to keep going. Yamazaki-san and Sumiko, and everyone else were depending on her. Finally, the backs of the Shinsengumi members in Hijikata's group, who were lying in wait a little ways away from the inn and waiting for the Shogun's representatives to arrive, came into view.

>"A message!" She shouted as loud as she could to get their

attention.<p>

"Hm?" Hijikata said, turning just in time to see a very out of breath Chizuru run up.

"Yukimura-kun!" Inoue exclaimed as she bent over, trying to catch her breath so she could finish delivering the all important message.

"What are you doing, here?" Sano asked.

"They're at the Ikedaya!" Chizuru exclaimed in between breaths.

"!" The men said, immediately snapping to attention.

"

"Ungh!" Sumiko grunted , gritting her teeth, as she pushed back her opponent. "Hah!" She yelled, head-butting him in the chin.

"Ahh!" The man cried out as he stumbled backwards, and she raised her sword to strike. \_"Aaaaah!"\_ He screamed as she struck him with her sword.

"Relax. I've been using the back of my blade, idiot." She told the unconscious man, sweat-dropping. These guys weren't very bright. No wonder so many of them had been sent. They were making up for quality with quantity!

"You should go ahead, Miyagawa-san!" Yamazaki said as he cut down another enemy.

"And let you have all the fun? I don't think so!" Sumiko retorted. No way was she leaving him here on his own, outnumbered. She didn't need his death on her conscience!

"

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped when she and the rest of the Shinsengumi arrived at the Ikedaya to find that Kondo's group had already busted down the doors and started fighting.

"Gen-san and the others, secure the area." Hijikata ordered.

"Let's go!" Inoue told his men, leading part of the group away.

"I'll go around the back." Sano said, running off to secure the rear exit.

"Huh?" Chizuru said when something caught her attention, causing her to turn. "Hijikata-san." Hijikata, Saito and the others turned to see what was going on and saw a number of samurai from the Aizu clan marching towards them.

"\_Now\_ they come." Hijikata said, furrowing his brow in irritation. "Saito, secure the inside. The Shinsengumi's vice-commander will greet our honored guests directly."

"Understood. We're going in!" Saito replied dutifully, leading the rest of the men inside to aid Kondo-san and the others.

\_SLASH!\_

Saito drew his blade, cutting down the first opponent unlucky enough to be in their way as they entered the inn.

"Let no one escape. No holding back. Kill all who oppose you!" He ordered his men.

"Thank you for the message." Hijikata told Chizuru after they watched the others disappear into the fray.

"Huh?" Chizuru said, glancing back at him. "No, I didn't do anythingâ€|" She said humbly.

"It's thanks to you that we can claim first right." He told her.

"First right?" She asked. Hijikata turned to face the approaching Aizu warriors and stepped forward to meet them.

"Shinsengumi, eh?" Their leader said as they halted. "Good work. We of the Aizu clan shall now take over."

"We of the Shinsengumi, under the Lt. General, are in the process of securing the Ikedaya." Hijikata declared strongly. "Your help is not required."

"Hijikata-san!" Chizuru said, surprised. Hadn't they been waiting for these reinforcements to come?

"What are you saying?" The Aizu leader demanded incredulously. "We have come to put down the rouge samurais gathered at the inn!"

"Would you please not enter the Ikedaya?" Hijikata said calmly, standing firm.

"You're saying that you'll block us!\_?" One of the lesser Aizu samurai asked incredulously.

"I'm saying this for your own sakes." Hijikata stated, fixing them with all with a stern glare.

"What was that?" The leader asked indignantly, clearly taken aback. Hijikata stepped forward again, closing the distance between them.

"If one entered not wearing the clothes of our unit, the men would immediately strike him down." Hijikata stated with unwavering certainty.

"!" The Aizu leader took a step back, unnerved by the steely gaze of the man before him.

"If you value your life, you will wait here." Hijikata told him as

Sumiko and Yamazaki finally arrived on the scene. "I'll say this again: your help is not needed."

"Sumiko-san! Yamazaki-san!" Chizuru said, relieved to see that they were both unscathed, though Sumiko seemed a little out of breath.

"If the officials could go in, subduing the rogue Choshu samurais would fall to them." Yamazaki explained for the girls' benefit while Sumiko took a moment to collect herself. "The bravery of the Shinsengumi, who went in first, could go unknown."

"But that'sâ€¦" Chizuru said.

"â€¦ Bullshit." Sumiko finished, annoyed on their behalf.

"That is in how little regard we Shinsengumi are held. The vice-commander, all alone, is trying to be the Shinsengumi's shield, to preserve the credit of his comrades." Yamazaki replied solemnly.

"Well, then. I guess I'd better stop wasting time and get to work doing my part." Sumiko said, straightening up, as an injured Shinsengumi member came limping out with Inoue's help.

"Hang in there!" Inoue shouted.

"Are you all right?" Chizuru shouted as she followed Sumiko over to them.

"Let me see the wound." Sumiko said. "Is it just the shoulder?"

"Y-Yes. I'mâ€¦ all right." The injured man said. "There are still injured inside."

"I'll get to them in moment." Sumiko said, pulling down his haori and kimono sleeves so she could bandage his wound. "Let's take care of you, firâ€¦ Ah! Chizuru!" She shouted, alarmed when the younger girl suddenly shot off into the danger zone without warning.

"Yukimura-kun!" Inoue called out, also alarmed, as Sumiko quickly finished tying the bandage in place.

"I'm borrowing this!" Sumiko said, taking the injured man's uniform haori, before rushing after her friend.

"Ah! Sumiko-san!"

Hijikata's eyes widened slightly as he glanced back in time to see her disappear inside the building.

â€¦^â€¦

"Yukimura-kun, no!" Sumiko heard Kondo shout, as she entered with her sword drawn, ready to defend herself. It took a second for her eyes to adjust to the dark inn and take in the chaos around her, but then she immediately spotted Kondo-san locked in battle with a Choshu rebel while Chizuru began rushing up the stairs.

"Chizuru!" Sumiko shouted, eyes widening when she saw another figure step out onto the top of the stairs to block her. She tried to run to her friend's aid, but another Choshu rebel cut her off.

"Yah!" He cried as he tried to strike her with his sword. Sumiko quickly blocked the attack, but she was distracted by a cry of alarm from Chizuru on the stairs. "!" Sumiko gasped, helpless to save her friend, as she watched the rebel swing his sword at her.

\_STAB.\_

Before any harm could come to Chizuru, Saito hopped onto the stairs and intervened on her behalf, killing her attacker.

"Saito-san!" Chizuru gasped, surprised and relieved to see him.

"I wouldn't sleep well knowing you'd died. But protecting you is not my job. If you're going to run into places like this, you'll have to defend yourself." He told her. Sumiko sighed in relief seeing that her friend was all right, but she soon discovered that was not the case for herself.

"!" Sumiko said, startled, when she just barely managed to avoid being stabbed through the head by her opponent. She grit her teeth, silently scolding herself for letting her guard down. That could have been fatal. "I don't have time to deal with you!" She snapped irritably, dodging his next attack, effortlessly as she stepped around and struck him on the back of the head with the butt of her sword, knocking him out cold. Compared to Saito, he looked like he was practically standing still. Shinpachi saw all this and let out a whistle in appreciation as she ran after Chizuru.

"All right." He said determinedly. "We can't lose to her, Kondo-san!"

"Nn!" Kondo agreed as they both cut down their opponents.

When Sumiko reached the stairs, Chizuru was already gone, and Saito was facing two more rebels who had run up to try to attack him from behind.

"Outta the way!" Sumiko roared boldly, charging up to help clear the way so she could find her reckless young friend. She grabbed the banister with one hand and swung around, kicking the first guy over the side.

"Uwaah!" He cried out as he fell to the floor below with a hard thud, while Saito cut down the one facing him.

"Where's Chizuru!\_?" Sumiko demanded without delay.

"She went to help Okita-san. He's coughing up blood."

"What!\_?"

â€"â^žâ€"

"Okita-san!" Chizuru cried out when she rushed into the room to find him covered in blood and fighting a dangerous-looking opponent. The man with blonde hair and red eyes paused briefly in his barrage of attacks to glance at her. Okita grit his teeth and charged forward again, thrusting his sword at the man. His opponent simply smirked as he effortlessly blocked the attack with his own blade.

"That's the extent of your skill?" He asked Okita mockingly. He pushed forward, shoving Okita back and sending him stumbling back. Okita coughed up more blood as he fell to his knees on the floor.

"Okita-san! You're bleeding!" Chizuru cried in alarm, rushing to his side despite the danger.

"You're another of his comrades, eh?" The dangerous man asked, turning his attention to Chizuru as he aimed his sword at her. "If you interfere, I'll kill you, too." He stated coldly.

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped as Okita suddenly shot back onto his feet and positioned himself protectively in front of her with his sword raised.

"\_I'm\_ your opponent, right?" Okita reminded him through labored breath, glaring dangerously at the man threatening her. "Can't you leave the kid alone?"

"How foolish." The other man remarked. "In your state, you can offer her no protection."

"I'm not useless!" Okita retorted angrily.

"You mustn't!" Chizuru yelled urgently, holding him back. "You're coughing up blood!"

"Hmph." The man said, about to put his sword away, when he sensed a sudden killing intent.

\_CLANG!\_

"Oh?" He said, intrigued, when he had to block Sumiko's attack when she came flying at him without hesitation. Though she was using the back of her blade, her sword did not waver. She had come at him in earnest, as if genuinely prepared to take his life. There was considerable power behind her attack for a human.

"Get away from them!" Sumiko growled dangerously, glaring daggers.

"That's a good look in your eyes." He told her. "It seems there's someone here who still has fangs." He applied more pressure to push her back, but she grit her teeth, refusing to be pushed aside. He was intrigued. A man twice her size would have been sent stumbling back. This girl was not normal. He smirked and put even more force behind his blade. Sumiko strained to hold her ground, but she felt herself begin to slide back as he continued to push. She clenched her jaw tighter and furrowed her brow as she glared fiercely at him, refusing to give in, as she continued to struggle against him, using the entirety of her strength to push back. The man's eyes widened slightly when her dark eyes briefly flashed gold. With one final

shove, he sent her reeling back.

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru shouted in alarm. Sumiko started to get to her feet again, but she paused, taken aback, when her opponent suddenly stepped back and sheathed his sword while he smirked down at her. She furrowed her brow in confusion. Was he backing off? Why? She should be relieved since she was clearly outmatched, but the look in his eyes as he stared down at her unnerved her.

"What are you up to?" Okita demanded calmly, still shielding Chizuru.

"From the moment you all rushed in, my work was at an end." The dangerous man replied calmly.

'There are no more sounds.' Chizuru realized. 'Is it over?'

"Wait!" Okita shouted, going after the man as he started to walk away.

"Okita-san, don't!" Sumiko shouted, rushing over to him as he fell.

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped, kneeling down beside him in concern.

"Dammit!" He cursed, frustrated that he couldn't make his body get up and move, as he watched the enemy calmly head for the window. "I can still fight!"

"As your attending physician, I order you to stay where you are!" Sumiko said urgently. "This opponent is beyond both of us at the moment."

"Hmm." The man smirked, pausing to glance back at them over his shoulder, before jumping out the window without hesitation, even though they were on the second floor. At least one of them was using their head.

"Okita-san!" Chizuru gasped in alarm when he coughed again and his head fell to the floor. "Okita-san!"

"He's lost consciousness, but he's still alive." Sumiko said, checking his pulse. "His breathing is labored." She carefully rolled him off of his stomach and onto his side, pressing her fingers into various places on his abdomen to check for swelling that might indicate internal bleeding. "Though I'm concerned he's coughing up blood, there doesn't seem to be any heavy internal bleeding, from what I can tell. He's in pretty bad shape, but he'll live." She announced, much to Chizuru's relief. "Chizuru. I need to check on the rest of the wounded. Can you stay with him? I want him kept on his side to make sure he doesn't choke on his blood if he needs to cough again."

"O-Okay! I understand." Chizuru said determinedly, nodding, as she moved to take over Sumiko's position supporting Okita's back so she could leave to check on the others and make arrangements for stretchers to be brought in.

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Sumiko stood with Hijikata and Kondo, wiping the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand, as she watched as the captured and bound rebels were finally handed over to the Aizu clan, while the injured members of their group that she had just finished patching up slowly make their way out of the inn. The sun was rising now. The Shinsengumi had fought all through the night. Of the twenty or so imperial nationalist samurai at the Ikedaya, the Shinsengumi struck down seven, and four sustained serious injuries. Considering they had challenged an enemy with such an advantage in numbers, the Shinsengumi achieved remarkable results. However, the injuries to the Shinsengumi's side were by no means slight. One of their men died. Two sustained grave injuries. Andâ€|

"Dammitâ€|" A barely conscious Heisuke groaned weakly as he was carried out on a wooden stretcher by some of his uninjured comrades. "Dammit! You'd better remembered me, next time we meet!"

"Okita-san. Why did you protect me?" Chizuru asked softly as she remained by his side. "You always say that if I get in the way, you'll kill me." Okita slowly opened his eyes and let out a weak laugh at himself.

"Actually, why \_did\_ I do that?" He wondered aloud, closing his eyes again.

'Okita-sanâ€|' Chizuru thought, wishing she could do more to ease the pained expression on his face.

â€"â^žâ€"

"You have a cut on your face." Hijikata told Sumiko, frowning and furrowing his brow, as he held a clean cloth out to her.

"Oh, thanksâ€|" She said, accepting the cloth and patting her face with it. Sure enough, there was blood on it when she looked. Sumiko pressed it against the cut again and held it in place to stop the bleeding. 'It must have happened when that guy nearly stabbed me through the headâ€|' She thought. "I got distracted because I was worried about Chizuru. That girl gave me a real scare back thereâ€|"

"You should be more careful." Hijikata scolded her. "Don't forget that you're a girl, too."

## 11. Aftermath and Recovery

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 11: Aftermath and Recovery<strong>

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><p>The Shinsengumi banner for 'Sincerity' fluttered slightly in the morning breeze as it was held high while the entire company marched proudly back to headquarters together with their wounded. Even though they had just spent the night fighting fiercely to protect them, the townspeople gathered in the street stared at the blood-splattered



warriors with open looks of open fear and trepidation.<p>

"That's the Shinsengumi." One man said with a trembling voice as he passed.

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\*\*Shinsengumi Headquarters,  
>Several weeks later...<strong>

A couple of sparrows could be heard chirping in the courtyard as Chizuru brought over a tray of medicine and water for the injured captains to take while Sumiko did her rounds checking the progress of the rest of the wounded. Okita and Heisuke had recovered enough to be out of bed.

"This is medicine." Chizuru said, smiling pleasantly, as she placed a packet and cup of water in front of San'nan-san as well.

"Oh, my. Am I taking it, too?" He asked. "The wound to my left arm has gotten better. Miyagawa-san removed the stitches yesterday."

"But Hijikata-san told me to bring it for you." She said. San'nan glanced at Hijikata and saw that he was staring expectantly at him, watching like a hawk, while he waited for him to take the medicine.

"San'nan-san. Let's just give in." Okita said, furrowing his brow as he swallowed the bitter medicine. San'nan smiled wanly as he reluctantly picked up the packet of powdered medicine.

"If the vice-commander orders it!" He said, furrowing his brow slightly, as he braced himself.

"Was this medicine specially prescribed?" Chizuru asked curiously.

"The Ishida medicinal powder?" Sano asked, knocking back some himself. "Well, yeah, I guess it's special."

"Ishida medicinal powder?" She asked. She couldn't recall having ever seen or heard of her father or Sumiko using it before. Was it new?

"Hijikata-san's family makes it." Okita said.

"That's right. If your body's been cut up, no matter how much it hurts, this'll heal you right up! That's Ishida medicine powder! C'mon, give it try!" Heisuke said animatedly, imitating the kind of sale pitch that might be used by a medicine seller. "I wonder how it really is!" he said, lowering his voice, as he opened his mouth wide and poured the medicine in. "Ugh! Gross!" he exclaimed, cringing at the bitter taste.

"Care to try me?" Hijikata asked darkly, raising his fist in a threatening manner. Heisuke had better finish taking it, or else!

"Eyah! G-Give me a break! I can't go getting' \_more\_ injuries, can

I!\_" Heisuke exclaimed, shrinking back, as he rubbed his bandaged head, earning a laugh from the others.

"Yeah. It'd be a problem if you broke him after I went through so much trouble to fix him." Sumiko said as she entered the room, smiling wryly, as she sat down.

"It's not fair that you're the only one who gets out of taking it, Sumiko-san." Heisuke said, pouting slightly. It was only a minor cut to begin with, but for some reason, her wound had healed twice as fast as it should have.

"I guess it does pay to be a freak of nature sometimes." She replied with a cheeky smirk.

"It's good that it didn't leave a mark, though." Sano said, smiling. "It'd be a shame to scar a pretty face like that."

"I wouldn't have minded. I got wounded for a good cause, after all." She said, smiling. "Besides, aren't scars like badges of honor?"

"Oh! You said something manly again." Shinpachi said, grinning. "Maybe I should start calling you 'Aniki', too?"

"Please don't." Sumiko deadpanned. "I get enough of that from Heisuke's group."

"Yes." Inoue said, smiling as they all laughed, before adopting a more serious expression. "Still, to think there were fighters who could even harm Okita-kun and Toudou-kun!"

"Yeah, I was lucky he decided to let me off the hook." Sumiko said. "I bit off more than I could chew attacking him."

"Next time we meet, I will be the winner." Okita stated calmly, though it was clear he was still bothered that the other man had gotten away.

"It seems they claimed that they weren't Choshu." Saito said.

"Yeah." Heisuke confirmed

"However, the Ikedaya supposedly cleared out its other guests that day." Saito stated.

"Meaning what?" Shinpachi asked thoughtfully.

"They may have been from another clan, spies who'd sneaked in for some reason." Saito suggested.

"But why? For what reason?" Sano asked. Saito shook his head. He couldn't say for sure. They all sat in silence for awhile and pondered what this turn of events could mean.

~"

Chizuru and Sumiko were clearing away the cups and taking them to be washed. Hijikata followed them out to have a quick word.

"Hey." He said, stopping them. "Go with Harada on patrol today." He told them.

"Huh?" but today's not our day to go on patrol with them" Chizuru said, confused.

"Shut up and go." He said calmly before turning and walking away. Sumiko blinked as they stared after him. What was that all about?

"^"

GONNNG~

A temple bell chimed as the sun began to set, bathing the streets of Kyoto in an orange glow. As Chizuru walked down the street with Sano's group, she noticed most of the people on the streets seemed to be either giving them nasty looks or going out of their way to avoid them.

"Um, Harada-san? I get the feeling people are avoiding us" She said.

"Hm? Ah, following the Ikedaya incident, they've come to completely hate us." Sano replied.

"But why?" Chizuru asked, confused. "All of you work to protect the peace here in Kyoto."

"Kyoto folk are Bakufu-hating Choshu toadies, that's why." Shinpachi said as he walked up with Sumiko and his group to meet them.

"Nagakura-san!" Chizuru said.

"Why don't you try raising your voice some more?" Sumiko suggested, sweat-dropping. "I think there are still some people on the outskirts of the city who haven't been offended by you yet." Shinpachi just laughed.

"Yo, Chizuru-chan! Learn anything about your dad?" He asked the younger girl cheerfully. Sumiko hadn't had any luck on her end.

"No. Not at all" Chizuru said regretfully.

"I see." Shinpachi said. "Well, if not today, there's always tomorrow, right?"

"Hai!" Chizuru said, perking up. Sumiko smiled.

"Shinpachi. Anything out of the ordinary?" Sano asked.

"Nope. Not on the surface." Shinpachi replied more seriously.

"On the surface?" Chizuru asked.

"There are rumors that more Choshu guys are gathering here in Kyoto." He explained.

"Eh?" Chizuru said. There were more of them?

"Things are lookin' suspicious again, huh?" Sano said, furrowing his brow.

'Just what is going to happen to Kyoto?' Sumiko wondered, furrowing her own brow slightly. Once again, she found herself wishing she had paid more attention in history class. She had memorized when most of the major events occurred and who would be involved, but the details in between about how certain outcomes were achieved were really fuzzyâ€|

"Sorry, but you all go on ahead." Sano told the rest of the men. "We've got something to take care of."

"Hai." The men replied obediently, marching off to return to headquarters without question.

"Eh?" Shinpachi said as he and Sumiko turned to stare after them.

"Shinpachi. Sumiko. You come, too." Sano told them. "Well, let's go." He said, glancing at Chizuru before walking off to lead them to their destination. Sumiko, Chizuru, and Shinpachi exchanged curious glances before following after him.

"Hey, Sano. Where are we going?" Shinpachi asked after awhile.

"Well, never you mind." Sano told him with a slight smirk as he glanced back over his shoulder.

"Never mind, you say?" Shinpachi asked dubiously, wondering what his friend was thinking leading them so far off course.

"What's that sound?" Chizuru asked as they left the alley and walked out into a street filled with light and music. The girls' eyes widened slightly as they took in all the sights and sounds. The sound of flutes and bells filled the evening air, and in the middle of the street was richly carved float with glowing paper lanterns. It was beautiful.

"Ah, that's right! It's time for the Gion festivalâ€|" Sumiko gasped, recognizing the familiar scene. She used to come to this festival with her parentsâ€| She couldn't believe it was already July.

"Right. Tomorrow is the second half of the Gion festival." Sano said. "This is your last chance to see the Yamahoko parade. Pretty great, huh?"

"Hai!" Chizuru said, smiling as she admired the floats.

"Mn. It's been a while since I've seen this, but it's still just as beautiful as ever." Sumiko said, smiling softly.

"Oh, you like these kinds of things that much, huh?" Sano asked, smiling.

Sumiko smiled even more, and her normally strong voice took on a

softer and sweeter tone as she began quoting one of her favorite poems:

"In my life  
>As in the twilight,<br>A bell sounds.  
>I enjoy the freshness of evening."<p>

"Oh. Not bad." Sano, said impressed. She had a good voice.

Shinpachi smirked and began reciting another poem:

"The sound of the bells of the Jetavana Monastery,  
>their ring is the transience of earthly things,<br>the color of the  
flowers of the sal tree imparts  
>the truth that the prosperous shall decay.<br>Neither shall the  
proud endure;  
>they are little more than a dream on a spring night.<br>Even the  
mighty perish at last,  
>and are as dust before the wind."<p>

"What was that?" Chizuru asked.

"The opening lines to the \_Tale of Heike\_, right?" Sumiko asked.

"Oh, you know it?" Shinpachi asked, smiling.

"My father owned a copy of it." She replied, smiling at the memory of the worn out book sitting on the shelf in their home library.

"That so? I haven't actually read the whole thing, but hearing the musicians just now made me think of it."

"Even the greatest splendor will fall to ruin. It means nothing lasts forever." Sano said solemnly.

"Will fallâ€¦ to ruinâ€¦" Chizuru said thoughtfully, looking down.

'Nothing lasts foreverâ€¦' Sumiko thought somberly, thinking of all the people she had come to care about in the Shinsengumi, and the unfortunate ending that she knew awaited most of them. The two men glanced at the girls and saw that they were both now wearing solemn expressions instead of smiles.

"Say, Shinpachi, you've confused the festival band's music with the bells of the Jetavana Monastery, haven't you?" Sano said, teasing his friend in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"It wasn't me! Heisuke said that!" Shinpachi retorted defensively, blushing slightly out of embarrassment.

"But you took what he said at face value, right?" Sano said, pointing at him.

"Sh-Shut up!"

"Pfft. Heheheh! " Sumiko and Chizuru started laughing, smiling at their antics. Regardless of what was to come, they were all together here, now. So, they might as well enjoy the ride while they still

could.

The guys smiled, relieved to see the girls smiling again.

"Wanna see it closer?" Sano asked them.

"Huh? Butâ€¦" Chizuru said, blushing, surprised when he grabbed her hand.

"Is it really all right?" Sumiko asked. Shouldn't they be getting back before they got in trouble?

"Yeah, what if Hijikata finds out we took our time getting back?" Shinpachi asked.

"As it turns out, it was Hijikata-san who instructed us to take out time." Sano revealed, smiling.

"Eh?" the other three said, surprised.

"I guess he meant it as a reward for the two of you." Sano said.

"Yeah. I wouldn't have expected that. Not from him." Shinpachi agreed, grinning, as the girls glanced between them.

Sumiko raised an eyebrow. Hijikata had a funny way of showing affectionâ€”telling them to 'shut up' and then arranging a treat for themâ€¦

"He may not look it, but he's a thoughtful guy." Sano said, noting the expression on her face.

"Well, thenâ€¦" Shinpachi said, taking Sumiko by the hand. "Let's go!" He cheered as he and Sano took off, pulling the girls closer to the floats.

"!" The girls gasped, surprised by the sudden lurch forward, as they made their way through the crowd, but the girls soon recovered and smiled excitedly as they joined in on the festivities.

## 12. Those Who Come From Darkness

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 12: Those Who Come from Darkness<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shinsengumi Headquarters<br>July, 1864\*\*

"We've received a formal request from the Aizu clan." Kondo announced to all assembled troops. "They want us to mobilize and subjugate the Choshu." There was a collective gasp as the men began murmuring excitedly amongst themselves.

"That's awesome!" Sano said.

"Even Aizu has finally acknowledged our actions." Kondo said, looking deeply touched at the thought.

"All right! This is the Shinsengumi's shining moment!" Heisuke cheered, pumping his fist in the air.

"The hell are you talking about? Heisuke, your wounds ain't healed yet, so you gotta stay behind." Shinpachi reminded him.

"Eh!\_? No way!" Heisuke exclaimed, blanching in extreme disappointment.

"Well, the injured need to rest and stay on standby, right?" Okita said, smirking slightly.

"That applies to you, too, Okita-kun." San'nan said.

"Huh?" Okita said. He glanced accusingly at Sumiko, but she just turned her head away, looking innocent.

"Though you may object, you shall stay here with me." San'nan ordered calmly but firmly. No exceptions. Heisuke and Okita heaved heavy sighs of defeat. Chizuru smiled.

"Sumiko-san. Yukimura-kun." Kondo said, calling the two girls to attention. "Will you accompany us as well?"

"Huh?" Chizuru said.

\_"Chizuru!\_" Heisuke asked.

"I'm not asking either of you to join us on the battlefield. We could use a medic and someone to help with relaying messages and carrying the wounded." Kondo explained.

"We won't force you." Hijikata said. "Decide for yourselves whether or not you want to go." Sumiko bowed her head in thought, but didn't take long to make her decision when she looked at the faces of those around her.

"Of course I'll come. Someone has to look after a bunch of rough guys like you." She said with a slight smirk, earning a few chuckles from the men.

"Iâ€|" Chizuru said a bit hesitantly, remembering how she had almost gotten in the way the last time when she rushed into the inn without thinking. She shook her head. No, things would be different this time. "If I can be of any use at all, I'll go, too." She said more determinedly.

"Mm." Kondo said, nodding in approval at the two of them, while Hijikata looked on silently.

"Sumiko! Chizuru! You gotta work enough for \_us\_, too!" Heisuke said, referring to himself and Okita.

"Yes, I'll do my best!" Chizuru replied enthusiastically.

"Your going is not a game." San'nan said rather coldly as he looked

at both girls. "Ensure that you are not a hindrance to the others."

"Ah! Yes!" Chizuru said, bowing her head, blushing slightly in embarrassment, while Sumiko furrowed her brow slightly. What he said wasn't wrong, but couldn't he have been a little nicer about it?

"All right! Let's do this!" Shinpachi declared boldly, getting to his feet.

"Yeah!" The rest of the men cheered. During the commotion, San'nan silently slipped out of the room alone and started walking along the porch. He paused in his steps for a moment to stare at his left arm. Though the wound had healed, he still couldn't use it the way he wanted. His hand trembled as he tried to make a fist with it.

~~~~~

The Shinsengumi's day to shine had come. Once again, the troops were assembled and in uniform, ready to march out to support the Aizu clan, as formally requested, in order to help drive back the Choshu forces that sought to enter the imperial palace.

"We of the Shinsengumi shall now mobilize that we may protect the city of Kyoto!" Kondo declared as he addressed the troops. The men all cheered in response. They took up their banner and started proudly marching out of the headquarters in formation. It was the start of the event that would later be called the Kinmon Rebellion, and was the beginning of a fierce battle that would engulf the city of Kyoto.

"Ah-ah. I wanted to go too!" Heisuke said, sighing, as he stood at the gate with Okita and San'nan to see the others off. "Staying behind here is way too boring! Okita laughed, smiling wryly, as he silently seconded that emotion.

"If you simply let your wounds heal, you can return to the front lines soon." San'nan reminded him with a slight smile. "But I, on the other hand"

"Ah!" Heisuke said, lowering his head regretfully. He should have kept his big mouth shut.

"Well, he means to keep quiet and get some \_rest\_" Okita said, jabbing Heisuke in the side with his elbow.

"Ow! The hell are you doin' Souji!?" Heisuke shouted incredulously at Okita as he headed back inside, chasing after him. San'nan watched them leave out the corner of his eye before looking forward again. Although Sumiko didn't seem ready to give up on him yet, he couldn't see how he could possibly get better when he could barely even do the simple finger and wrist exercises she had assigned for him to practice. 'If I take that medicine I may be able to wield a sword once again.' He thought.

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**\*\*Fushimi Magistrate's Office\*\***



"In the name of Katamori Matsudaira, Lt. General of Aizu, we are the Shinsengumi." Kondo declared when they had reached the gates of their destination. "We hastened here, having been requested to protect the capital!"

" 'Requested', you say?" the samurai who had come out to greet them asked, furrowing his brow. "I received no such word."

"However, we have a formal letter!" Kondo insisted, standing his ground. "If you would pass it to your superiors"

"Even if I did, the answer would still be the same! Now go." The samurai retorted, waving his hand dismissively. "We have no use for you Wolves of Mibu."

"How cruel. Calling them that!" Chizuru said.

"Better a wolf than a lapdog who only knows how to bark." Sumiko muttered, furrowing her brow in annoyance.

"Well, this is how others treat us." Sano said, smiling wryly, as he placed a hand on Chizuru's shoulder.

"But" Chizuru said.

"Being the Shogun's rep falls to the Kuwana domain." Sano said. "If we handle this badly, it could bring disgrace to Aizu."

"Then, I take it slapping that fool would be out of the question?" Sumiko asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Most definitely." Sano replied with an amused smile as Saito stepped forward to whisper something to their commander.

"Commander Kondo, we'll get nowhere with the Shogun's representative. Let's leave the magistrate's office and join up with Aizu." Saito suggested calmly.

"That's our only choice. I guess we'll have to look for where the Office of Kyoto Protector has set up camp." Kondo said, glancing back at the others. Hijikata nodded in approval.

"

The heat was oppressive and the cry of the cicadas deafening as they marched under the hot summer sun to find the Aizu. Sumiko and Chizuru waited outside with the troops with Kondo was let in to speak with the officials.

"Hijikata-san." Sumiko said, stepping forward. "While we have a moment, anyone who has water should drink some. If they stay out in this heat without hydrating properly, they won't be in a good condition when it's time to fight."

"Understood." He said, nodding in approval of the suggestion. "Did you hear that, everyone? If you have water, start drinking! Don't forget to replenish your liquids, or you won't be any use to us later!" The men began talking amongst themselves and pulling out their bamboo water containers to drink. They didn't need to be told

twice. A few minutes later, Kondo emerged with new orders.

"We shall now head for Kujogawara!" Kondo announced, pointing to the direction they were headed. Everyone immediately stowed their water away again and followed their leader without hesitation.

â€"â^žâ€"

The sun was beginning to set by the time they reached the camp in Kujogawara.

"The Shinsengumi, on standby with us of the Aizu clan?" Asked one of the Aizu troop leaders incredulously when they broke the news to him. He glanced at one of the men beside him. The man shook his head. "I've received no word of that." He said proudly. "Sorry, but please confirm with our feudal residence."

Sumiko frowned in annoyance. He didn't look sorry at all. What was this a game of human hot-potato? They should go ask themselves, and know their pain of being sent on a wild goose chase.

"Again?" Chizuru asked, furrowing her brow.

"Your feudal residence?" Shinpachi asked impatiently, raising his voice, as he walked forward to stand beside Kondo. "They told us Shinsengumi to come to Kujogwara!"

"Hey." Kondo said quietly, holding out his arm in front of Shinpachi to remind him to calm down. "I want to talk to the head of your camp." Kondo told the Aizu samurais patiently. "Could you take me to see your higher-up?" The troop leader furrowed his brow, about to refuse, when he noticed all the intense death glares he was receiving from the rest of the Shinsengumi, who were running out of patience after having to march around all day in the heat.

Maybe it wouldn't hurt to reconsiderâ€|

### 13. The Blue Hour

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 13: The Blue Hour<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"At least it's a bit cooler now that it's darkâ€|" Sumiko commented as she sat around a small fire outside the Aizu camp with Chizuru, Saito, Sano, Okita, Inoue, and Shinpachi while they waited for further orders from Kondo and Hijikata.<p>

"It would seem that these Aizu soldiers are just for back up, and not the main force." Inoue said after glancing around. "Soldiers for the main force are apparently protecting the Hamaguri Gate."

"So, will the Shinsengumi be treated as back up forces, too?" Chizuru asked.

"It's inevitable that we will." Inoue said regretfully.

"Tch." Shinpachi clicked his tongue in irritation. "The message that came to our headquarters said that time was of the essence."

"They sure do know how to piss people off, don't they?" Sumiko deadpanned.

"We can head for the battlefield at once, should conditions call for it." Saito said. "Now, at present, this is all we can do."

"Okay!" Chizuru said, nodding. "I don't think I can relax all night long!"

"Well, good night, then." Sumiko said abruptly, lying back in the grass.

"Eh? Sumiko-san!" Chizuru said, flustered, as she glanced around to see the reactions of the others.

"What? It's been a long day." She said, propping herself up as she raised an eyebrow at her friend. "We should rest while we can, or we'll be too tired when it counts."

"She's right, Chizuru." Sano said. "Just say if you want to rest. I can at least lend you my thighs." He teased.

"I'll be fine!" Chizuru replied quickly, blushing, as she looked away.

~~~~~

In the early hours of dawn, when much of the sky was still a deep blue, Sumiko found herself awoken by a sudden feeling of unease. She glanced around but saw no immediate cause for alarm. She decided it must have been caused by a bad dream that she had left behind the border between waking and dreaming and simply couldn't recall at the moment. Shinpachi caught her eye and held a finger to his lips, nodding at Chizuru. Sumiko smiled wryly when she saw that Chizuru had actually fallen asleep while sitting up, poor thing. She must have tried to sit up with the others.

BOOM!

"!" Sumiko gasped, shooting up into a sitting position at the sound of an explosion echoing in the distance.

BOOM! BOOM!

Everyone was on alert now, and Chizuru was startled away when the others suddenly jumped to their feet.

Kondo came running out of his tent to stand beside Hijikata as he looked off in the direction the sounds had come from. They could see the glow of a fire burning in the direction of the palace and plumes of black smoke rising into the sky.

"Let's go." Saito said, springing into action.

"Hai!" Chizuru said as she and Sumiko hurried to follow after him and the rest of the men.

"Wait there, Shinsengumi!" The jerk who had greeted them the day before shouted. "We were ordered to stay on standby!" Hijikata glared fiercely as he turned to face the man. He'd had enough of all this bureaucratic bullshit.

"On standby to provide support should those Choshu bastards launch an attack!" He snapped at them.

"B-But, the order to move hasn'tâ€"

"If you have even a shred of pride in your job, you pricks will stop talking about 'orders' and \_do something!\_" Hijikata shouted with righteous fury as he and the rest of the Shinsengumi headed out. Sumiko kept her head down as she ran. She had to fight hard to suppress her blush and grin as she followed that fierce man into battle. This was badâ€| She was starting to really, really like himâ€|!

The Aizu soldiers stared after the Shinsengumi, watching as the bold country samurai faded into the distance. Their leader furrowed his brow.

"Okay! Follow them!" He ordered his troops.

â€"â^žâ€"

When the Shinsengumi arrived at the scene of the battle, they found it littered with corpses and the walls were smoking, damaged by canon fire. Whoever was responsible for the carnage appeared to have already moved on. Hijikata glanced at Saito and Sano, who nodded in understanding and immediately set off to gather intel while the rest of them worked with the Aizu to organize the chaos and care for the wounded.

"Still, to think they'd raid the emperor's palaceâ€| Just what are those Choshu guys thinking?" Kondo wondered out loud.

"Don't tell me, if they'd go this farâ€|" Inoue said, astonished.

"They'll learn what befalls those who humiliate themselves." Hijikata said gravely as Saito came running back with more information from a survivor.

"At dawn, a Choshu presence sent to the Hamaguri Gate was apparently driven off by some Aizu and Satsuma forces." Saito reported.

"Hmph. Satsuma coming to Aizu's aid, huh? The world sure is changing." Hijikata remarked sardonically.

"Hijikata-san," Sano said, rushing back with his own report to give, "they say there are still some Choshu guys at the Kuge Gate."

"What?" Hijikata asked, furrowing his brow.

"Commander." Yamazaki addressed Kondo, suddenly appearing out of

nowhere with his usual ninja-like stealth. "Men believed to have incited this attack on the imperial palace are headed for Tennozan Hill."

"What do we do, Toshi?" Kondo smirked.

"Harada. Take some of the men and head for the Kuge Gate. Drive off the remaining Choshu." He ordered.

"Yes, sir." Sano said, nodding, before immediately leading a group of men away to do just that.

"I want you and Yamazaki to find out the situation." Hijikata told Saito. "Provide backup protection for the Hamaguri Gate, as originally planned."

"Sir." Yamazaki replied, nodding.

"Also, Commander, I have an important job for you." Hijikata said, turning to face Kondo. "There are defeated forces other than those headed for Tennozan Hill. They'll probably head for home, forcing supplies from stores along the way."

"Yeah." Kondo agreed.

"To track down and kill them, we will have to leave the capital. You are the only one who can get us permission for that." Hijikata said. Kondo nodded.

"Understood." He said. "I'll find a way to persuade the Kyoto Protector somehow."

"Yeah. Gen-san, you go with him. Keep an eye on the commander here and make sure he doesn't go out of control." Hijikata added with a more humorous tone.

"Understood. Leave it to me." Inoue said, smiling wryly, while Kondo scratched his cheek, looking a little bashful, while the men laughed good-naturedly. Sumiko and Chizuru smiled. Hijikata really was a great vice-commander.

"Everyone else, come with me!" He ordered, glancing back in their direction. His eyes stopped for a moment on the girls before he turned back to face forward again. "We're going to Tennozan Hill!"

"Hai!" The girls responded determinedly with Shinpachi and the rest of the men.

"Let's go!" Hijikata said, leading them away.

#### 14. Race to Tennozan Hill

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 14: Race to Tennozan Hill<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Chizuru was panting heavily by the time they reached the bridge. She didn't understand how Sumiko could handle all this running with such grace. How was she able to keep up with Hijikata-san and the others so easily? Was it because she had slightly longer legs?<p>

"Ah." Sumiko said quietly when she saw that there was someone standing in the middle of the bridge up ahead, causing Chizuru to glance up. "Ah!" She gasped louder as both girls' eyes widened in surprise and alarm when they saw the man's familiar blond hair and crimson eyes. Before they had any chance to warn the others, the man from the Ikedaya suddenly drew his sword and cut down the man unlucky enough to step within his reach first.

"Aaaah!" The man screamed in pain as he fell onto his back with a harsh thud. Sumiko furrowed her brow and glared at their comrade's attacker, as she, Chizuru, and Shinpachi rushed to his aid. The red-eyed bastard was smirking. He was clearly enjoying this.

"Hey, you okay?" Shinpachi asked urgently, drawing her attention back to her patient.

"Let me see." Sumiko said, moving the injured man's hand to get a better look at his wound. Fortunately he had managed to avoid receiving a fatal wound and had mostly been struck across his arm and shoulder. "This will probably need stitches later, but for now, let's focus on bandaging to stop the bleeding and keep it from getting worse."

"Ah, allow me." Chizuru said, pulling out clean cloth to rip and create bandages with.

"Those coats mean you're the Shinsengumi, yes?" The dangerous blond man asked.

"Be careful, Hijikata-san." Sumiko said, furrowing her brow. "This man was at the Ikedaya. He's the one who injured Okita-san."

"What?" Hijikata asked, glancing back at the blond man with smoldering eyes. So, he was the oneâ€|

"I was surprised to see you two at the Ikedaya that night, but to see you here again in search of more gloryâ€| Looks like you country samurai haven't had enough yet." The blond man said loftily. "No, I can't even call you dogs 'samurai'."

"So, you're one of the skilled foes that was there at the Ikedaya? Your attempts at provoking are rather sophomoric." Hijikata said calmly, almost as though he were laughing at the man.

"Hmm." The man said, frowning slightly in disappointment. "I'd heard you were a band of skilled, rogue samurai. "Seeing you like \_this,\_ though, it would seem it was a lie." He said, glancing pointedly at the man he had just wounded. Sumiko clenched her jaw as she glared up at him. "Okita, huh? His skill was so meager that he couldn't be called a swordsman."

Shinpachi stood up. He'd had enough.

"If you want to speak ill of Souji, by all means do so. But before you do, tell me why you attacked this man. If I do not accept your reason, I will kill you here and now!" He stated angrily, glaring daggers at the man.

"You bastards know nothing of samurai pride." The blond man stated cynically. "All you think of is gaining notoriety. You're the dogs of the Bakufu. For what reason are you pursuing the defeated, those who've already fled the battlefield? Why can you not understand the pride of the Choshu samurai, who seek Tennozan Hill as a place to slit their stomachs?"

"So it's all right to take a person's life in the name of someone else's pride?" Chizuru asked incredulously, furrowing her brow.

"Hm?" He said, glancing at her with a piercing gaze. There was something about this womanâ€¦

"I think you're the one who doesn't understand." Sumiko said bravely, drawing his unwanted attention away from her friend. "Being protected by someone in name alone, having someone else do your fighting for you while you take the easy way outâ€¦ who wants that kind of useless pride\_!\_?"

"Well, if the Shinsengumi exists to achieve such great deeds, how can it defile the pride of another?" He retorted.

"That'sâ€¦" Chizuru said, stumbling for a reply.

"You had me curious, talking like a big shotâ€¦" Hijikata said, closing his eyes briefly, before fixing the man before him with a harsh glare. "Don't insult the battlefield!" He said sternly.

"What?" The blond man asked.

"Pissants who start fights for their own selfish reasons, and then, lacking the resolve to die in battle, turn tail and run don't deserve the glorious death of a warrior!" Hijikata stated fiercely. "Beheading is enough for a criminal. The honor of cutting ones own stomach is wasted on traitors who would attack the imperial palace, is it not?"

"You're saying that instigating battle should equate a readiness to be killed?" The blond man asked, clenching his fist around the hilt of his sword.

"If you instigate battle without the readiness of death, you are not meant to be called a warrior." Hijikata said, drawing his sword. "If they have a warrior's pride, then our holding nothing back would be a parting gift, yes?" As he poke and aimed his sword at the blond man, the rest of the men cautiously moved forward to surround him, prepared to draw their own blades if necessary to back their vice-commander up.

"Imbeciles! Have you bastards forgotten your own roles?" Hijikata demanded sternly, scolding the rest of the men, as he glanced expectantly at Shinpachi. Shinpachi smiled wryly and nodded in

understanding, having been properly chastised.

"Hijikata-san, I'll be borrowin' command of this unit for now." He said, breaking out into a sly grin. "Let's go!" He told the men.

"Yes!" The men replied dutifully, rushing off to apprehend the Choshu warriors on Tennozan Hill, as originally planned, while Hijikata stayed behind with the girls and injured man.

"Sumiko! Chizuru! Look after him!" Shinpachi shouted, referring to the injured man, as he turned to follow the others.

"Hai!" They said determinedly.

"You pricks!" The blond man said, turning to go after them.

"Fool!" Hijikata shouted as he struck at him to keep his attention elsewhere. The man dodged, and Hijikata used the opportunity to position himself between him and the men heading for the hill. "Keep your eye on your opponent! Don't you know what a duel in earnest means?" Hijikata asked, smirking slightly, as he furrowed his brow and raised his sword slightly. "Well, it would seem that you have readiness. The readiness to strike down our comrade, at least."

"You are skilled with your mouth, at least," The blond man said, smirking. "But do you honestly think you can kill me?" He asked, lunging forth to attack. Hijikata blocked and the two of them became locked in battle.

Sumiko and Chizuru watched anxiously as the two men continued to exchange blows, silently willing Hijikata to win. Sumiko's eyes widened when Hijikata struck his opponent's blade, and the blond man loosened his grip on the handle of his sword, letting it fly into the air. Once again, the bastard was smirking. His smirk widened when he saw her eyes flash golden again in anger when she realized part of what he was up to.

"!" She and Chizuru gasped as the runaway sword headed straight towards them. Chizuru immediately threw herself on top of the injured man to shield him, and Sumiko threw herself on top of Chizuru to shield her.

\_STAB!\_

"!" Hijikata gasped and his eyes widened in horror when he saw what had happened from his angle. It looked like Sumiko had been skewered by the sword. Fortunately, this was not the case. The thing the sword had stabbed had been the wooden railing of bridge. It had only grazed Sumiko's arm and part of her back, slicing open a relatively shallow wound.

"Chizuru! You're bleeding!" Sumiko said, wincing, as she quickly pulled out a clean cloth to bandage the shallow cut on her arm, but she wasn't fast enough.

The blond man's sharp crimson eyes saw the wound on Chizuru's arm heal almost instantly, before she even had time to start wrapping the bandage. He smirked, satisfied with the results of his test, but then he narrowed his eyes and frowned slightly when he noticed the wounds



on Sumiko's back were not doing the same. It could mean only one thingâ€|

"Kazama. That's enough." A deep voice said firmly.

"Hn?" The blond man said, glancing up in response to hearing his name called by a familiar voice. The tall, muscular man with dark red hair and blue eyes that had suddenly appeared behind Sumiko retrieved Kazama's sword from where it was embedded in the railing of the bridge, taking care not to cause further injury to the girls while doing so.

"You should know full well that, as we've sided with Satsuma, there's no reason to fight the Shinsengumi." The redheaded man said, tossing Kazama's sword back to him.

"Hmph." Kazama smirked slightly as he caught it with ease and returned to its sheath in one fluid motion. He then carelessly turned his back on Hijikata completely and started walking over to join his redheaded comrade. "I didn't think it possible, butâ€| \_sure enough\_." He mused aloud to himself as he passed the two girls, glancing at them out the corner of his eye to see that they were both glaring up at him as they continued to shield the injured man and each other. The redheaded man bowed politely to Hijikata before following after Kazama.

Sumiko exhaled a sigh of relief once they were gone.

'That is one crazy bastardâ€|' She thought as Hijikata sheathed his sword and came over to check on them.

"Are you all right?" He asked as he kneeled down beside them, concerned.

"I-I'm fine, but Sumiko-sanâ€|" Chizuru said worriedly, glancing at her friend.

"I'm probably fine." Sumiko said, smiling wryly despite the pain from her wound. "It doesn't feel that deep, but I can't actually see it, soâ€|"

"Allow me." Hijikata said, moving closer to examine the wound on her back. His touch was surprising gentle. Chizuru noticed her friend was trying hard not to blush and smiled slightly at the sight, despite her concern. It was her first time seeing such an adorable expression on the older girl's face.

"Mn. You'll be all right." Hijikata said at last as he retracted his warm hands and started preparing a clean cloth for a bandage. "It's a shallow wound."

"Ah, thank goodness." Chizuru said, allowing herself to relax after hearing the good news, while he wound the bandage around Sumiko's arm and back, over her kimono.

â€"â^žâ€"

As they slowly made their way to the hill, Hijikata supported the injured man while Chizuru supported Sumiko, even though she tried to insist she could walk on her own.

"Hijikata-san!" They had just begun to walk the path up hill when Shinpachi and the others came running down to meet them. One of the other men stepped forward to relieve Hijikata and takeover supporting their injured comrade.

"We went up there, but those Choshu guysâ€¦ they committed seppuku, every last one of them." Shinpachi reported solemnly.

"Eh!\_?" Chizuru gasped.

"Suicide, eh? They may be the enemy but that's a splendid way to die." Hijikata conceded admirably.

"That's all right?" Sumiko asked. What was the big rush for, then?

"As Shinsengumi, no it ain't right. They did our work for us." Hijikata replied glancing at her. "However, when it comes to giving credit where credit is due, things like 'enemy' and 'foe' don't matter. Do you understand?" Sumiko and Chizuru looked down thoughtfully. Sumiko smiled slightly as she looked back up.

"Yeah, I think I do." She said. It was basically good sportsmanship, showing respect for your opponent, win or lose. Hijikata smiled, glad to see that she understood.

"I feel like I do, and I also feel like I don't." Chizuru said quietly, causing both of them to smile at her honesty. That was just like Chizuru.

"Whoa, what happened to you!\_?" Shinpachi asked Sumiko when he finally noticed the bandages. "You didn't try to fight that guy, too, did you?"

"No, this was just an unhappy accident." Sumiko said, sweat-dropping. "Or, rather, for some reason, that bastard seemed to be aiming for usâ€¦"

"What?" Hijikata said lowly, furrowing his brow.

"The city! It's on fire!" One of the men shouted suddenly.

"!\_?" They all gasped, turning to see for themselves.

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped, horrified, while Sumiko furrowed her brow and bit her lip. In all the excitement, she had forgotten that the city was supposed to burn at some point as a result of this stupid rebellion. She closed her eyes and bowed her head, silently mourning the disaster and all the lives that would be lost as a result while the others looked on in shock and anger.

The leaders of the radical Choshu who attacked the imperial palace died in battle or fled to take their own lives, but those who escaped alive set fire to the capital, burning down 27, 511 homes, 1,207 storehouses, and 253 temples and shrines. Also, 22 out of 23 Gion Festival floats were lost. Following this, the Choshu were treated as rebels who had turned against the imperial court. It became known in history books as the Kinmon Rebellion.

## 15. Letters to Edo

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 15: Letters To Edo<br>\*</strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>August, 1864<strong>

"So, Itou-san in the Shinsengumi, huh?" Heisuke asked. He had wondered what Kondo, Hijikata, and San'nan had called him in for.

"He's a gifted swordsman, and a splendid debater, which both Heisuke and San'nan-kun acknowledge." Kondo said.

"Yes, but Itou-san is an imperial nationalist of the Mito City tradition." San'nan reminded him. "Can he fit in with us Shinsengumi?"

"What? If you speak to him of our purpose, he's sure to join forces with us." Kondo said confidently. "Heisuke, you were Itou-sensei's fellow pupil. I'd ask you to speak with him. I will make for Edo later."

"Yeah. Got it." Heisuke said confidently. San'nan bowed his head, still feeling uneasy about the idea. Although Hijikata said nothing, he, was less than thrilled about the idea, especially after seeing San'nan's reaction.

â€"â^žâ€"

San'nan had quietly left the meeting and was making his way back to his room, when someone called out to him from behind. "Have you been doing those rehabilitation exercises I gave you?" Sumiko asked. She had been looking out the window of her room as he passed and decided to step out onto the porch to speak to him for a moment after noting how down he seemed. It's not like she had anything better to do since they wouldn't let her go on patrol until her wound finished healing. "I told you in the beginning it would take time to get back to normal. Don't worry about using a sword for now. You'll do yourself more harm than good if you try to overdo it. Just focus on those exercises I gave you." San'nan turned to face her.

"Nothing gets past you, does it, Miyagawa-san?" He asked with a wan smile. "Where did you learn to read people so well? Is it because you're a doctor?"

"Partly, but mostly it's because I grew up in an orphanage." She replied calmly. "You have to learn how to tell who you're dealing with quick if you don't want to end up going home with an adult who's got a bad personality. It can be hard to prove you're being abused if they're smart about it. I figured that out the hard way."

"Your parents abused you?" San'nan asked, surprised. But she always spoke so fondly of themâ€|

"No, not them. The man before." She said, frowning. "I had to runaway when I realized it wasn't a daughter, but a \_punching bag \_that he wantedâ€¦ That's how I met the Miyagawas, actually. I cut myself breaking a glass window to get out. It was pretty bad, so when I saw their clinic, I decided to risk going in. When they asked me how I got hurt, I told them the truth, and they believed me. They helped me get away from that man and eventually ended up adopting me. I guess they got attached after investing so much in my welfareâ€¦ Anyway, enough of the sob story. The point is, even when things seem bad, there's always a chance that they can still get better. So, don't give up, okay?" She said, turning to go back inside her room.

â€"â^žâ€"

Meanwhile, Chizuru was out on patrol with Saito's group. The sun was beginning to set on Kyoto. Looking at the ruined remains of all the buildings damaged in the fire, Chizuru couldn't help but wish Sumiko was there with her. However, since it was only just recently that the older girl recovered from the wound on her back, Hijikata-san had insisted she wait a few more days before going out on a patrol, even though Sumiko kept stubbornly insisting she was fine. Chizuru smiled slightly at the memory of the indignant look on her friend's face while she had unsuccessfully tried to argue against the strict vice-commander. However, her smile faded when she saw the refugees wandering the streets. So many people had lost their homesâ€¦

"Um, Saito-san!" Chizuru said, speaking up.

"What is it?" He asked, stopping to look back at her.

"May I go speak to those people over there?" She asked, glancing over at a message board where people were looking at lists for the missing and dead and notes from survivors left to tell friends and family where to find them. "They may know of my father."

"We can't spare much time, though." Saito told her. They were supposed to be returning to headquarters soon.

"Hai!" Chizuru said, nodding, before dashing off without wasting any time.

Unfortunately, none of those people had seen her father either.

"Are you all right, Yukimura?" Saito asked, seeing how subdued the normally cheerful girl was.

"Hai." Chizuru replied.

"If you feel ill, say something soon."

"Huh?"

"We can't have you push yourself so hard that you collapse."

Chizuru smiled, understanding that it was Saito's way of showing concern for her. She was a bit more cheerful the rest of the way back to headquarters.

“”

The next day Sumiko and Chizuru were doing the laundry by the well in the courtyard when Heisuke approached them.

"Chizuru! Sumiko!" He called out to get their attention.

"Heisuke-kun." Chizuru said, standing up. "What is it? Why are you dressed like that?" He looked like he was ready to go on a long journey.

"Going somewhere?" Sumiko asked.

"Yeah." Heisuke replied with a smile. "Will you tell me where your house in Edo is?" He asked Chizuru.

"Huh? Yes, but? Why?" Chizuru asked, blinking.

"I have to go to Edo for member recruitment." He said.

"Member recruitment?" Sumiko asked.

"Yeah. People have started to respect the things we've done, so the area we protect has been expanded." He explained.

"Is that so? Amazing!" Chizuru said with open admiration.

"Mm. Congratulations!" Sumiko said, smiling. Heisuke smiled.

"I'll investigate Koudou-san as much as I can, too, so hold out hope." He said.

"Yeah! Okay, hold on a minute." Chizuru said excitedly, running back inside for a minute.

"Thanks, Heisuke. Be right back." Sumiko said, following after her. The two girls each made a quick note. Chizuru made one for her father, and Sumiko made one for Matsumoto-sensei in case he had returned to Edo. She figured he might know something since he and Chizuru's father were friends.

"If you make it to our neighborhood and mention Yukimura, the Western doctor, everyone is sure to know him." Chizuru said as she placed her letter in Heisuke's hand.

"And if you have the time, this one is for Matsumoto-sensei." Sumiko said, handing over her letter as well. "His clinic is a couple of blocks away. He may know something if he's back, but if he's not, you can just leave this letter for him."

"Okay." Heisuke said accepting the letters.

"Well, thank you very much." Chizuru said humbly as both girls bowed to show their appreciation.

"Okay, I'm off." He said, smiling as he lifted his hat.

"Take care of yourself, okay?" Sumiko called after him.

"Yeah." He said, waving goodbye, as he left.

"Good for you, Chizuru." Sumiko said, grinning, as she hugged the younger girl.

"Un!" Chizuru said, smiling happily. Since they couldn't find her father in Kyoto, maybe he had already returned to Edo. She really hoped Heisuke would be able to find him.

## 16. Opposing Blades

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 16: Opposing Blades<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"I'll put your tea here." Sumiko said, setting Hijikata's cup down beside his tray for him.<p>

"Yeah. Sorry." Hijikata said as he picked up his bowl of rice to begin eating. Sumiko smiled slightly and looked away before she started to blush.

"Um, where's San'nan-san?" Chizuru asked as he held the tea tray with his cup still on it, glancing around the room. They had already been warned that Shinpachi and Kondo wouldn't be eating with them that evening, since Kondo had gone to Edo, but they had assumed San'nan would still be there since nothing had been mentioned about him.

"It looks like he's doing a little investigating." Okita said.

"Is that so? Then, I guess tea would be better once he's gotten back." Sumiko said.

"We made too much." Chizuru said regretfully.

"Just leave it there." Hijikata said. "Someone will drink it later."

"Oh, okay." Chizuru said, perking up. Sumiko smiled.

"It's salty." Saito abruptly.

"Huh?" Sumiko said as they glanced at him. For a moment they had almost thought he was talking about the tea, but he was staring at the seaweed he was holding up in his chopsticks.

"Whoa! This is terrible!" Sano exclaimed after tasting his own. "Souji, you made this, right!\_?"

"You don't have to say it like that!" Okita said with an annoyed sigh. "Anyway, I'm the one who boiled the greens and flavored them with soy sauce. I don't think it tastes nasty or anything!" He said, calmly taking a bite of it, while Saito stood up, holding the small dish of salty greens.

"I'm going to rinse this off." Saito stated coolly. "Too much sodium isn't good for one's health."

"Ah, that's true. You're more likely to have high blood pressure." Sumiko said as he left. Sano glanced between his nasty veggies and the door.

"Me, too." He said, getting up to follow Saito.

"Heh?" Chizuru said when even Hijikata got up quietly and left with his veggie dish, closing the door behind them. Okita stared after them for a moment before putting down his chopsticks.

"Well, I guess I'll rinse this off a bit, too." He decided, heading out the door at a quick pace. Chizuru stared after them in silence for a moment, stunned. Each and every one of them had just got up and leftâ€¦

"Pfft!" Sumiko laughed. Even Okita had given up. It tasted that bad, huh? "Come on, Chizuru, we should probably go rinse ours off, too."

â€"â^žâ€"

"Are you going to see San'nan-san?" Okita asked Sumiko when he spotted her heading for the deputy-commander's room with a tray of rice balls, water, and a packet of medicine.

"Yeah. I can see a light in his room, so he must be back, right? It seems like he's been trying to avoid me recently, so I figured it's about time I give him a check up. Even if he's doing something important, he shouldn't skip meals. He'll make himself sick." She said.

"Is that why you're bringing him medicine?" Okita asked.

"He told me that sometimes he still feel pain in his left arm." She replied solemnly. "This is just a weak painkiller to help dull it in case it's acting up again."

"I'll take it to him." Okita offered, surprising her a bit. "I've brought my own medicine to share with him." He said, smirking, as he held up a jar of sake. Sumiko smiled.

"You're a sly one, aren't you? Yeah, I think that's a good idea." She agreed, handing over the tray. "Too much sake is bad for the body, but a cup or two every now and then with a friend is good for the soul."

"I wish you'd make prescriptions like that more often." Okita said, with a laugh and a rueful smile.

"Good night, Okita-san." Sumiko said, smiling wryly, as she turned and headed for her own room. Okita watched her walk away for a few minutes to make sure she was really going before continuing on his way to meet up with San'nan.

"San'nan-san? You still awake?" Okita called through the door.

"Is that you, Okita-kun? You may enter." San'nan replied. Okita slid

the door open while balancing the tray and sake in one hand.

"Diligent, aren't you?" He asked when he saw that San'nan was holding a beaker of red liquid. Just as he had thought, San'nan was still working on that medicine. "You won't get anywhere if you get sick doing all this research, though." Okita said, shutting the door behind him.

"No need to worry." San'nan replied calmly. "I've been sick for some time now."

"Yeah, and certain doctor has noticed." Okita said, setting down the tray from Sumiko. "She was going to come herself before I intercepted her. She knows you're avoiding her. Still, can't have her finding you here and seeing all this, can we?"

"No." San'nan replied a bit more solemnly, narrowing his eyes slightly as he glanced at the rice balls. "Anyway, look at this." He said, showing him the glass container of red medicine. "I've improved the Ochimizu. Theoretically, this should have reduced side-effects."

"Feel like trying it?" Okita asked. "If you feel confident, I won't try to stop you."

"I find myself hesitant for some reason." San'nan admitted.

"Well, if you fail, I'll do you a favor and kill you." Okita said.

"My, that's reassuring." San'nan said with a wry smile.

"Well, anyway, what do you say? Want some?" Okita asked, switching to a happier subject, as he held up the jar of sake.

"Sake? That sounds better for my body." San'nan agreed, smiling, as he turned away from the red medicine sitting on his desk.

â€"â^žâ€"

**\*\*October, 1864\*\***

"Itou-dono!" Kondo said excitedly, smiling brightly, as he greeted their honored guest and the two men he had brought with him, with Hijikata at his side. "We've awaited you."

"I'm humbled you came to greet us in person, Commander." Itou said as they shook hands, smiling politely.

"Who's that?" Sumiko asked curiously. After hearing an important guest was coming, she had snuck out with the captains to have a peek from a safe distance away. Heisuke was still headhunting in Edo.

"Itou Kashitarou." Shinpachi replied. "Apparently, he's achieved full mastery of the Itto style."

"I seeâ€|" Sumiko said thoughtfully, furrowing her brow slightly. The



name sounded familiar, but she couldn't really remember why it was important at the moment. At any rate, she wasn't sure she liked the look of this guy—there was something too rehearsed about that smile of his. His mannerisms were kind of feminine, too.

"I heard Itou-san espoused imperial nationalist philosophy. I'm surprised he'd have his name associated with the Shinsengumi." Saito said.

"The same mindset as those Choshu guys, huh? Can someone like that really get along well with us?" Sano asked.

"Itou-san is a highly educated and gifted speaker." San'nan said as he came up behind them.

"Heh?" Sano said, as they all glanced back at their guest.

'But don't we already have San'nan-san for that?' Sumiko thought, frowning slightly.

"Ah! So, San'nan-san, you know?" Sano started to ask, but by the time they turned to look back at him, the deputy-commander was already walking away with so much as a parting word.

"San'nan-san is becoming less and less congenial lately, huh?" Shinpachi asked as they all stared after him, concerned.

"Yeah. He hardly ever talks these days, either." Sano added.

"He's always been a difficult patient, but now whenever I try to talk about his progress with the physical therapy exercises, he ignores me or shuts me down." Sumiko said, frowning.

"Well, he never was the kind of person to engage in idle chatter—" Sano said. Okita remained silent as he chewed on a piece of grass.

"Well, I guess I'd better go help Chizuru get the refreshments ready." Sumiko said, heading for the kitchen. "You guys better look busy before Hijikata-san catches you."

"Ah, that's right." Shinpachi said, sweat-dropping. Who knows what their demon vice-commander would say if he found them slacking off while they had a guest.

—"

"Ow!" Chizuru said, quickly pulling her hand back after burning her finger on one of the hot sake containers they were heating up in a pot of boiling water to go with their guests' evening meal.

"Ah, did you burn yourself? Let me see." Sumiko said, checking her friend's sore finger. "It looks all right." She told Chizuru, smiling. "Just pour some cool water over it for a minute or two."

"Sumiko. Chizuru." Hijikata said, getting their attention, as he walked up to stand the doorway of the kitchen. "Bring the sake to the room once it's warmed."

"Okay, we'll be there soon." Sumiko said. Hijikata watched as she began carefully removing the hot containers one at time and placing them on a tray to carry while Chizuru quickly took care of her finger.

"I got word from Heisuke." He said.

"Huh?" Chizuru as both girls stopped to glance up at him.

"Apparently, he went to your home. There was no sign of Koudou-san." Hijikata told Chizuru. "Heisuke will stay in Edo a while longer. He'll let us know if he finds any clues."

"Is that so? Thank you very much." Chizuru said, though she couldn't help but feel a little disappointed.

"Yes, thank you." Sumiko said, placing a hand on Chizuru's shoulder.

"Sure." Hijikata said, smiling slightly at them. Those two really were close, weren't they? Just like sisters.

â€"â^žâ€"

Kondo and Itou laughed as they dined together, enjoying their meal and conversation.

"This is wonderful." Kondo said, smiling. "I'm thrilled to have added more men to our ranks. Even more so that they have such skill."

"Oh, not at all." Itou said, holding up a hand to cover his mouth as he smiled, looking as though he was very much enjoying all the compliments he had been receiving. Hijikata quietly and San'nan had been eating their meals quietly, leaving the conversation up to Kondo. "The Shinsengumi's codes are quite strict, are they not?" Itou said, turning to look at the two executive officers. "San'nan-san, please be my teacher, if you would."

"Heaven forbid. There's nothing I could teach you Itou-san." San'nan said politely with a self-deprecating smile.

"Itou-san. Come, have another." Kondo said, offering to pour his new friend some more sake.

"Thank you very much." Itou said, smiling politely, as he held out his cup.

"Hijikata-san." Itou said, turning his attention to the silent and stoic vice-commander. "I've heard the men regard you highly, and that you are a man of action. I would be grateful for your support going forward."

Hijikata closed his eyes and inclined his head slightly in response.

"Pardon me." Chizuru said, opening the door. "I've come to collect any empty containers."

"Ah. Thanks." Kondo said as she knelt down beside him and set about

her task.

"Not at all." Chizuru replied humbly. "SuânMiyagawa-san is preparing more sake as we speak."

"Oh, is that so? Miyagawa-san knows how to have a good time, huh?" Kondo said, laughing good-naturedly. Chizuru smiled. Neither of them seemed aware that Itou was watching her every move with keen eyes.

Outside in the courtyard, Chizuru placed the empty sake containers in a wooden tub of clean water to be washed.

"Could you, perhapsâ€|?" She heard Itou muse aloud. She turned to see that he was standing just a few feet away. He had followed her out.

"May I help you with something?" Chizuru asked politely as she stood up and turned to face him.

"What, pray, is a person like you doing here?" Itou asked, stepping closer.

"Huh?" Chizuru said, confused.

"You're not a soldier, are you?" He asked, moving even closer. Chizuru took a step back. Something made her feel uneasy about the way he was looking at her.

\_SLIDE.\_

Before Itou could take another step, the sliding door of the room next to the one he had been eating with Kondo and the others in slid open, and his eyes widened slightly as he had to spin around and dodge the sword being swung in his direction. Chizuru stared with wide eyes, stunned, as leaves that had been sliced from the camellia bush that Itou had been standing beside fluttered in the night breeze. The person who had charged forth so forcefully was none other than Okita Souji.

"Okita-san!" Chizuru said, surprised. Itou stared calmly at Okita before glancing at the beautiful camellia flower that was balanced so gracefully on the tip of the his raised sword.

"A place of men is not a place of flowers." Okita said smoothly as he positioned his sword so that it was aimed at Itou, and the flower was now within the other man's reach. "But as Itou-san has graced us with your presence, I thought I'd give you something for your eyesâ€|"

Translation: \_Take this and get lost.\_

"My." Itou said, reaching out to take the flower from the sword. "Yes, it is lovely." He held close to his face and inhaled the camellia's sweet, subtle fragrance. "Cutting it with a sword is rather heavy-handed, however." He said, glancing up at Okita from over the flower. \_Don't think I don't know what you're up to.\_

"Being somewhat heavy-handed is a hallmark of the Tennen Rishin

style." Okita replied as he re-sheathed his sword. \_Good. Better watch your back, then.\_ "You! There's still some cleaning up to do, right?" He told Chizuru. "Hurry back."

"Hai!" Chizuru said. Itou smiled slightly as he watched her obediently run off to attend to her duties.

"Thank you for the flower, Okita-san." Itou said calmly as he walked past him to return to the dining hall.

"Hnn." Okita said, smirking a little darkly as he watched the other man leave. That man was pretty sharp. Well, as long as he remembered to keep his hands to himself in the futureâ€|

"Did something happenâ€|?" Sumiko asked, raising an eyebrow, when she rounded the corner with a tray of fresh warm sake containers and saw that someone had sliced part of the top of the camellia bush off at an odd angle.

"Just a little pest control." Okita replied with a Cheshire cat smile. "It would seem one snuck in through the front gate."

"Oh, is that so?" She asked carefully, eyeing the room Itou and the others were in, taking the hint. "I suppose we'll have to be more careful not to let ourselves get bitten, thenâ€|"

## 17. Bad Moon Rising

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 17: Bad Moon Rising<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"It's gone fast, hasn't it?" Inoue remarked while he sat on the porch with Chizuru, enjoying the warm cup of tea she had brought him, while they watched the snow fall gently in the courtyard. "It's already more than a year since you and Miyagawa-san joined us, Yukimura-kun."<p>

'Oh. It's been that longâ€|' Chizuru thought, bowing her head slightly. 'So much has happened since we came to Kyoto looking for my fatherâ€| But I still don't know where he is.'

"Thank you." Inoue said, snapping her out of her reverie.

"Huh?" Chizuru asked.

"Though a guest, you've been entrusted with many responsibilities." He said. "You've truly been a help, you and Miyagawa-san."

"I'm happy to have been of some use." Chizuru said humbly, blushing slightly after receiving such open praise.

â€"â^žâ€"

"We expect our ranks to swell again. I think it would be best to look

for a new headquarters fast." Kondo said, looking at the map of that had been laid out in the middle of the room.

"The men look like they've got it rough, sleeping together all in a huddle." Shinpachi said. Sumiko had already warned the men numerous times that the barracks would become a breeding ground for disease if they weren't careful about hygiene.

"But can you think of any place that might welcome \_us\_, the Shinsengumi?" Okita asked.

"Hmmâ€¦" Kondo said thoughtfully. "It would make things easier if we couldâ€¦"

"Nishi Hongwanji Temple." Hijikata said firmly.

"Huh?" Kondo said as they glanced at him.

"Eh?" San'nan said, looking surprised.

While all the Shinsengumi members seemed to be staring at Hijikata like he'd just said something unreasonable, Itou had simply smiled, as if he approved.

"Nishi Hongwanji Temple is a hiding place for outlaw, rogue samurai such as the Choshu." San'nan reminded Hijikata. I can't imagine they would simply accept us."

"None of that matters!" Hijikata replied austerely. "Up till now, Choshu has been using temples and priests as pretext to do what they want, right? If it comes to it, we will use force to make them consent."

"Don't you think it unseemly to use martial force to repress the actions of priests?" San'nan asked, concerned.

"Well, that's true." Shinpachi said hesitantly. "It may be as you said, San'nan-san."

"Toshi's opinion is sound, but San'nan-kun's thoughts make sense as well." Kondo said thoughtfully.

"Nishi Hongwanji. Is it not good?" Itou asked.

"?" Kondo said, glancing at him.

"I have done some research as well." Itou said, pulling out a folded piece of paper. He opened it up and set it out for the others to see. It was a written proposal to make Nishi Hongwanji their new headquarters. "It's location and conditions make it a ideal headquarters. As Hijikata-kun mentioned, making a temple our base will also let us clamp down on the Choshu."

"True, Choshu would lose one of their hiding places." Saito said.

"Well, I'm sure the priests won't be too happy, but being at Nishi Hongwanji would make it easy for us to move if we had to." Sano said.

"Yeah, but stillâ€¦" Shinpachi said, not entirely convinced it was okay to use force against holy men.

"Hmmâ€¦" Kondo said thoughtfully, pondering everything that had just been said.

"However! A cause bereft of justice can only lead to ruin." San'nan objected earnestly.

"San'nan-san." Itou said. "As always you are a deep thinker, aren't you? Howeverâ€¦ pushing things forward requires forceful and bold tactics. I understand your wish to be able to play things safe, however."

"Safe?" San'nan asked. Itou stared at San'nan for a moment.

"It seems your left arm has become unusable." He stated.

"!" San'nan's eyes widened as everyone in the room tensed at the mention of such a taboo subject.

"You may have become unable to live as a swordsman, but you should not concern yourself with it. Your wits and thoughtfulness seem more than enough to keep aiding the Shinsengumi." Itou said with a trace of a smile.

Hijikata furrowed his brow and grit his teeth. \_How dare he?\_

"Just what do you mean by this, Itou-san!?" Sumiko heard Hijikata demand sternly as she approached the room from the outside with a tray full of tea. "San'nan-san is, as you say, as gifted theorist. However, he is still needed by the Shinsengumi as a swordsman!"

"Hijikata-kun." San'nan said, closing his eyes. "My arm isâ€¦"

"Hai! Please pardon the intrusion!" Sumiko said loudly as she shoved the door open with a little more force than necessary. The men nearly flinched in surprise when they saw her tense smile and the vein throbbing on her temple. She was pissed.

"A-Ah, Miyagawa-sanâ€¦ sorry to trouble you." Kondo said, smiling wryly and sweat-dropping, as she entered the room and began serving everyone their tea.

"Oh, Itou-san." She said, setting his cup down with harder than was needed. "Please refrain from the use of such gross hyperbole in the future. San'nan-san's left arm is not 'unusable'. As his attending physician, it is really quite irksome to hear such comments being made when he has yet to complete all the stages necessary in the therapy I am giving him. He is still on his way to making a full recovery." She stated rigidly, giving the man a steely warning glare through her long eyelashes.

"Oh, dear." Itou said, sounding a little more nervous than he had meant to as a tiny bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face. "Th-That was quite rude of meâ€¦ Yes, the most important thing is that San'nan-san's arm heals." Sumiko's dark expression lifted slightly.

"Yes. Enjoy your tea, Itou-san." She said, excusing herself. It was silent for a few moments after she left. Itou stared at his cup of tea, almost afraid to drink now. It wasn't poisoned, was it? That woman was truly frightening when angeredâ€¦

Okita and Sano had to bite back smirks after seeing the look on Itou's face when Sumiko was telling him off. She was spending way too much time with Hijikata. She had been totally rocking that death glare back there.

"â€¦ We've had some differing opinions," Kondo began tentatively, "but I say we proceed with Nishi Hongwanji Temple." San'nan stood up silently and left the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

"Through the addition of a gifted officer, the deputy-commander has been relieved of his dutiesâ€¦" San'nan mused sadly to himself as he walked away.

â€œ"â^žâ€œ"

"San'nan-san has had it rough, huh?" Sano said as he stared up at the orange sky. The sun was setting now. He, his fellow captains, the two girls, and even Hijikata had all gathered to hang out for while outside on the porch and steps. "The other soldiers have been steering clear of him."

"Steering clear of him?" Chizuru asked.

"Because he has the same attitude with everyone. The soldiers are scared of him and won't go near him." Shinpachi explained.

"He wasn't like that way back in the old days, huh?" Sano said. "He was kind, looked out for othersâ€¦"

"Was calm and friendlyâ€¦ on the surface." Shinpachi added.

"But inside, his heart was pitch black." Sano finished.

"Yup. Pitch black." Shinpachi agreed with a straight face before they both broke out into laughter. Sumiko raised an eyebrow as she and Chizuru stared at them.

"Unless we joke about itâ€¦ it'd too hard to bear, wouldn't it?" Okita said. Sumiko's expression softened slightly, knowing exactly what he meant.

"Still, that bastard Itouâ€¦ His way with words really pisses me off." Sano said.

"Like he's putting on airs, or looking down at people." Shinpachi said.

"Yeah, he's always disguising his maliciousness with 'nice' words and manners, so Kondo-san won't notice." Sumiko said, frowning.

"I don't like him either." Okita said. "Though I acknowledge him as a very talented swordsman."

"I can't stomach him!" Hijikata said bitterly, still upset over how

he had treated San'nan. If Sumiko hadn't come in when she hadâ€|

"So, Hijikata-san, take him back for a refund." Okita said. "Be like, 'the Shinsengumi don't need this'."

"Kondo-san wouldn't allow that, would he?" Hijikata reminded him. "It's like he's infatuated with the guy."

"Jeez, you're useless, aren't you? Doing the unreasonable is your job, Mr. Demon Vice-commander." Okita told him.

"Then, Souji, why don't you become vice-commander?" Hijikata retorted acerbically.

"No way, that's too much work." Okita said, with a laugh, though his smile soon reverted to a more solemn expression.

"Saito-san, do you not care for Itou-san either?" Chizuru asked.

"Having men of different thinking join us will diversify our organization." Saito replied calmly after a moment. "However, if we try to force diversity, it could cause things to collapse from within."

"So, now we're living in a house of cards, huh...?" Sumiko said, resting her head in her hands. "Just once I'd like to give him a good slap and wipe that smug grin off his face."

"You almost did, too, didn't you?" Sano asked, smirking.

"Eh!\_?" Chizuru said, glancing at her friend for confirmation.

"Well, he was pissing me off with the way he was talking to San'nan-san!" Sumiko said defensively. "He deserved a good scare!"

"â€| Do you really think San'nan-san's arm still has a chance of making a full recovery?" Hijikata asked. Sumiko suddenly found everyone staring at her.

"Of course." She replied. "I wouldn't have said it if I didn't believe it. That would've been cruel to give him false hope. It won't happen over night, but as long as I can keep needling him into following the routine I worked out for him, eventually he should be able to wield a sword again. He can already perform most everyday actions with his left hand. He may not be able to achieve the same skill level as before, but he should still be able to hold his own against an opponent who's better than average by the time I'm through with him."

"Is that so? I see." Hijikata said, relieved. "Thanks for the hard work."

"Ah, well, it's nothing." She said, hiding her blushing cheeks with her hands. "At this point, it's mostly up to San'nan-san."



â€"â^žâ€"

Later that night, Chizuru was lying in bed that night, unable to sleep as she thought about everything the others had said that day. The situation with Itou-san concerned her, but more than anything, she was worried about San'nan-san. She glanced over at Sumiko, who was already sound asleep, curled up in her own futon. Even though Sumiko had said San'nan-san would be all right in the long run, it was a shame they couldn't find a faster way to help him.

\_All we can do is have him take that medicine or something, huh?\_

Chizuru's eyes widened as the previously forgotten words Okita had said after they first heard the report about San'nan's wound drifted to forefront of her mind. She sat up in her futon.

'Just what medicine was it that Okita-san was talking about?' Chizuru wondered. She looked over at Sumiko again to check that she was still asleep and quietly got up to get dressed. She didn't think Sumiko would approve of snooping around for something that could be dangerous, so she decided not to tell her. She would just go have a quick look on her own. She'd be right back. As Chizuru slid her sword through the loop in her hakama, she realized she could hear someone quietly walking around outside. Chizuru slid her door open a crack to take a peek.

'San'nan-san!' She thought, surprised to see the deputy-commander wandering around on his own so late at night. 'Where is he going at this hour?' Chizuru watched him open a gate and step into the next section of the yard before slipping out of her and Sumiko's room and carefully closing the door behind herself to follow him.

There was an eerie mist hovering around the grounds of the headquarters as Chizuru tailed San'nan under the pale moonlight from what she deemed to be an appropriate distance. Everything seemed to be going well until he turned a corner, and she suddenly lost sight of him. Stepped out into the open lane, trying to figure out where he could have disappeared to so quickly.

CAW! CAW!

A black crow flew overhead as Chizuru tried entering the nearest building first. She removed her shoes and walked silently down the hall until she spotted a door that was still slightly ajar. It was dark inside, but she could make out a small vial filled with a red liquid sitting on the desk at the back of the room. It almost seemed to be glowingâ€|

"I never thought I'd be found out by \_you\_." San'nan said, startling her. She whipped her head around to see that he was now standing only a foot away from her. "I hadn't dreamt of it, Yukimura-kun."

"San'nan-sanâ€|" Chizuru said, suddenly feeling like maybe this wasn't such a good idea. But he didn't seem to be upset, on the contrary, he invited her in to take a closer look.

"Please, come inside." San'nan said as he stepped past her to enter the room first. "Are you wondering about this?" He asked, standing in

front of the desk with the red medicine on it.

"What is it?" Chizuru asked.

"It's medicine that your father, Koudou-san, made by secret order of the Bakufu.

"Huh!\_?" Chizuru gasped.

"Apparently, it was originally brought over from the West a secret medicine that could dramatically change humanity."

"A dramatic change, you say?"

"Yes. To put it simply, an increase in muscle strength and healing properties. However, it had a fatal flaw. Those who were administered the medicine You've seen them with your own eyes."

Suddenly an image of the white-haired, crazed Shinsengumi members that she and Sumiko had seen the first night they met Hijikata, Okita, and Saito flashed through Chizuru's mind.

"!" She gasped fearfully, covering her mouth. It couldn't be! She watched as San'nan reached out and picked up the vial of medicine.

"Having been given the medicine, they lost all reason, and became bloodthirsty monsters." He continued to explain. "Koudou-san worked to improve this medicine using the Shinsengumi as his proving grounds."

"It can't be! My father's experiments brought people to ruin?" Chizuru asked, horrified.

"No way!" Sumiko gasped, causing them both to turn and see her standing in the doorway, wearing a haori over her white sleeping kimono with her long hair still down. "That has to be a lie, right?"

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru said.

"Ah, Miyagawa-san. I was wondering when you might find this place." San'nan said.

"I was looking for Chizuru..." Sumiko said, furrowing her brow. "I noticed she was gone. I was starting to get worried when I couldn't find her but then I saw her shoes outside this building."

"I see." He said, smiling wryly. "Well, what you just heard me tell Yukimura-kun was not a lie. It's all true. But, unfortunately, he went missing and research on the medicine was halted. Using the notes he left behind, I contributed what I could to make this. If I take it, my left arm may become healed. If I've properly prepared the elixir."

" 'May', you say? It's too dangerous." Chizuru said anxiously.

"That's right!" Sumiko said firmly, stepping further into the room. "And I've already told you, even without something like that,

youâ€" "

\_"That's not good enough!"\_ San'nan shouted furiously, startling them. "If I don't use this, my arm will never heal! I'm already useless as a human being!"

"That's not true, and you know it!" Sumiko yelled, starting to get angry at the way he was talking about himself.

"Everyone thinks highly of your kindness!" Chizuru said urgently, placing a hand on his shoulder. "So, pleaseâ€"|"

"To dies as a swordsmanâ€"|" He said lowly.

"What?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow.

"If you're telling me to simply keep living, as a corpseâ€"|" He paused as he turned to glance between the girls. "Please, let me die as a man." He popped the top off of the vial.

\_"No!"\_ Sumiko shouted, rushing over to try to stop him.

"San'nan-san!" Chizuru cried, trying to grab the vial, but they were both too late. Before they could stop him, San'nan was already swallowing the red medicine. They stood there, stunned, as they stared at him with wide eyes. San'nan only had a moment of peace before he crumpled to his feet in pain, making gagging noises, as if he were choking.

"San'nan-san?" Sumiko asked, ignoring the bad feeling she was starting to get, as she stepped past Chizuru and leaned over to check on him. "Are you choking? Can you breathe?"

"Stayâ€"| back." He managed to choke out.

"Are you all right?" Chizuru asked, concerned, as Sumiko cautiously reached out a hand to check his pulse as his hair began to fade.

"Heh." Sumiko's eyes widened when San'nan's glowing red eyes met her dark ones. "!" The next thing Sumiko knew, she was being slammed backwards onto the floor with San'nan's hands around her neck.

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru screamed.

## 18. A Cry in the Night

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Previously:<strong>

\_"No!"\_ Sumiko shouted, rushing over to try to stop him.\_

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\_"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru screamed.\_

\* \* \*

## ><p><strong>Chapter 18: A Cry in the Night<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"Runâ€¦| Chizuruâ€¦|" Sumiko choked, gasping desperately for air, as San'nan tightened his grip around her throat. No matter how hard she tried to remove his hands or scratch at them, he just kept squeezing.<p>

"Stop it, San'nan-san!" Chizuru cried, trying to pull him off with little success. "Please! It's Sumiko-san! You'll kill her!\_!"

!" San'nan gasped in realization and the glow in his crimson eyes dimmed as he reeled back, pulling his hands away from Sumiko's throat as if he had been burned.

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru gasped, falling to her knees to check on her friend.

"Hah!\_?" San'nan gasped again, horrified, as he watched Chizuru try to comfort Sumiko as she coughed and gasped for air, breathing deeply. "L-Looks like I'm a Failed, aren't I?" He asked "It would seem I haveâ€¦| even less luck than I thought."

"San'nan-san, are you all right?" Chizuru asked anxiously, looking up at the struggling man as he turned his back on them, holding a hand over his mouth and forehead, desperately trying to stay in control of himself.

"This isn't the time for you to be worrying about \_me\_, is it? Please, kill me while you can." He asked.

"Kill you!\_?" Chizuru gasped in alarm.

"No way!" Sumiko coughed, getting back on her feet. "You might be the

worst patient ever, but you can't expect me to just kill you!"

"The medicine was a failure. My mind is almost already gone. At this rate, I'm sure to kill you!" He said urgently as he struggled with himself.

"But But there's no way we could do that!" Chizuru said, stepping closer.

"Stay back, Chizuru." Sumiko said urgently. "He's still dangerous!" Even if she didn't want to kill him, there was no denying that fact.

"Do it!" He roared furiously at them as his eyes started to glow again.

"Get back!" Sumiko said, pushing Chizuru behind her, as they started backing up towards the door.

"San'nan-san?" Chizuru said, on the verge of tears.

"Even under the influence of this medicine, if my heart stops, I can die." He said, reaching past Sumiko's waist to grab the hilt of Chizuru's sword.

"San'nan-san!" Sumiko yelled, gritting her teeth, as she and Chizuru grabbed onto it too to stop him from drawing it.

"Stop it!" Chizuru cried.

"Come. Kill me now." He said, struggling against the two of them for control of the sword.

"We, can't San'nan-san!" Chizuru said.

"Stop it! Think of the others!" Sumiko snapped at him. "What are they going to do if you die?"

"Someone! Someone, please!" Chizuru started screaming for help.

"Please kill me." He urged them.

"Stop it!" Sumiko yelled sternly as he started to pull the sword out of its sheath a little more. "Let go, San'nan-san!"

"San'nan-san!" Hijikata shouted as he, Okita, and Saito arrived on the scene, coming to the rescue. Hijikata immediately charged into the room and delivered a hand chop to San'nan's neck, knocking him off balance, so that he was forced to let go of the sword.

CLICK.

Without San'nan pulling on it, the sword slid back into its sheath, and the girls were finally able to let go, too. Saito and Okita immediately rushed over to grab San'nan before he could recover. It took both of them to restrain him.

"Ah!" Sumiko gasped in alarm, grabbing onto Chizuru as she fainted

before he head hit the floor. "Chizuru! Get ahold of yourself, girl!"

"Nnâ€\_aaaahh!\_" San'nan roared as he completely lost control again struggled to break free from Okita and Saito.

"San'nan-san!" Okita said. San'nan's roar faded into a miserable whine as he crumpled to his feet.

"Vice-commander!" Saito said.

"Shinpachi, take the Maekawa estate, while Harada, you take the Yagi." Hijikata order the two captains who were still waiting on standby in the hall. "Watch the soldiers' movements. Let no one approach this room!"

"Okay." Sano said.

"Saito, stand by in the garden." Hijikata ordered next. "Keep an eye on Itou's men."

"Understood." Saito replied dutifully.

"Hijikata-san, I'll stay here." Okita said, remember the promise he had made to San'nan to kill him if he became a 'Failed'.

"All right. Tonight will decide it." Hijikata said gravely as he stared down at San'nan, who was curled up on the floor. His breathing was heavily labored. "Whether he lives or diesâ€ or becomes broken."

â€"â^žâ€"

"I could try giving him a tranquilizer," Sumiko offered as Hijikata carried the unconscious Chizuru while escorting her back to their room, "but I can't guarantee it'll have the right reaction with that strange medicine he just took."

"Shut up. You've done enough." Hijikata snapped harshly, surprising her.

"Whaâ€"!\_?" She cried out incredulously when she found herself being shoved into the room with enough force to send her stumbling. "Hey!" She shouted indignantly as she spun around to face him, watching as he laid Chizuru down on top of her futon. "I know you're worried about San'nan-san, but don't take it out onâ€"

"What do you know\_!\_?" He rounded on her, glaring fiercely, as he stood. "You don't know \_anything\_! So, keep your mouth shut and wait here till I'm ready to deal with the two of you!" Sumiko stared up at him in shock. The look in his eyesâ€ they were just as cold as they day she had first met him. It was like he was staring at a stranger. She closed her mouth. She didn't know what to say. Hijikata furrowed his brow and frowned as he turned his back on her and stalked out of the room. He slammed the door shut behind him and leaned against the wall, bowing his head. He said one word too many. He hadn't meant to make her look so hurtâ€ but for her sake, he hoped she really didn't know anything. If she had gone in there on purposeâ€  
>He shook his head. He couldn't think about that now. He had to find Gen-san and get him to guard the girls to make sure they didn't run

away while he tried to sort this mess out.<p>

”

Sumiko sat down on top of her futon for awhile, staring silently as the individual threads in the tatami mat. She wasn't sure for how long she sat there like that, but eventually she decided to pull herself together and get dressed. Sumiko put her covers over Chizuru so she wouldn't catch a cold while she was making herself look more decent. At the very least she wasn't going to sit around being interrogated in her bedclothes and messy hair. She had just finished tying up her hair when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

” She wanted to ask who it was, but she was almost afraid to find out if it would be Hijikata. She didn't want to admit it, because she was usually tougher than this, but being treated like that by him had hurt a lot more than she thought would. She breathed a quiet sigh of relief when she saw the person's profile had a topknot. "Is that Inoue-san?” She asked tentatively.

"Ah, Sumiko-san are you all right in there?" Inoue asked, detecting a note of anxiety in the voice of the normally unflappable woman.

"Hai." She replied a bit too quietly for his taste. "It's just very quiet in here, since Chizuru's fainted." Sumiko said a little louder, regaining some strength in her voice. "This girl's just way too delicate, unlike me."

"Haha." Inoue laughed. There, that was better.

"Inoue-san?"

"Hai?"

"How is San'nan-san?"

” I'm sorry." Inoue replied, truly sounding it. "I've been ordered not to talk to you about that."

” I see." Sumiko said, going quiet again. "I'll let you know if Chizuru wakes up." She lowered her head as she pulled on a haori to keep warm while she waited for Chizuru. After a few minutes, she got up and went over to the desk, pouring some water on the inkstone to wet it, and rubbed it with the stick to create more ink. She dipped her brush in it and began writing whatever came to mind on a sheet of paper:

The man I once knew,  
>with the eyes of a stranger,<br>glares fiercely at me.\_

It has been frozen  
>the warm spring within my heart<br>has become  
winter.\_

"Hijikata-san."

Sumiko's hand froze as she moved onto the next line when she heard

Inoue speak.

"How fares San'nan-san?" He asked.

A drop of black ink fell and formed a stain on her haiku.

"We still don't know." Hijikata replied grimly.

Another drop.

"Hah!"

"!" Sumiko jumped, startled, when Chizuru suddenly gasped and shot straight up in her futon behind her. Set the brush down and turned to stare incredulously at her friend for the mini-heart-attack she had just given her.

"Where am I?" Chizuru asked, glancing around in confusion.

"You're back in our room, silly." Sumiko replied, sweat-dropping.  
"You fainted again."

"Eh?" Chizuru said, looking at her as the door slid open.

"Would you mind explaining this situation?" Hijikata asked coldly, fixing Chizuru with the same steely glare he had shown Sumiko earlier. Chizuru's face fell when she saw the look in his eyes.

Sumiko furrowed her brow. It would seem his mood had yet to improve. She watched cautiously as he stepped into the room. With the way he was looking at them, it was hard to tell whether or not they were still safe with him. It was like a switch had been flipped. His cold eyes met hers.

"Sit." He said sternly, gesturing for her to sit on the floor beside Chizuru's futon. Sumiko frowned.

"I'm not a dog." She retorted icily, staying right where she was.

"You'll only make things more difficult if you don't cooperate." Hijikata said, furrowing his brow, as he continued to stare at her.  
"For yourself, and for her."

Sumiko glanced at Chizuru before reluctantly getting up and doing as she told, glaring defiantly at him the whole way. It wasn't fair. He knew Chizuru was her weak spot.

"Now," Hijikata said, sitting down across from the two girls once Sumiko was seated, "what were the two of you and San'nan-san doing together?"

"I don't know. I woke up, and Chizuru was gone. For some reason, I felt uneasy, so I rushed off to find her." Sumiko replied rigidly as she held his gaze.

"I thought San'nan-san's arm would get better if he had medicine, so I went looking for some." Chizuru said quietly. "Then, I happened to catch sight of him—"



Sumiko glanced questioningly at her. Hijikata could tell the younger girl's answer had caught her off guard.

"Um, the medicine San'nan-san drankâ€¦ is true that Dadâ€¦ that my father was involved with it?" Chizuru asked. Sumiko glanced back at Hijikata, waiting to see if he would answer.

"You heard that from San'nan-san?" Hijikata asked.

"Yes." Sumiko replied grimly. "He said the medicine makes people stronger, but it destroys their wills. He said it was made by order of the Bakufu, and used on the Shinsengumi they had at handâ€¦ But I can't see Sensei going along with something like that." Hijikata sighed heavily.

"If you've already heard, it can't be helped." He said. "It's true, Koudou-san was in charge of its development, but he vanished before completing it."

"!" The girls gasped, tensing after hearing their fears confirmed. Hijikata noted that they seemed genuinely appalled.

"Those who've taken the medicine are at the Maekawa estate. They're fine so long as they're kept away from blood, but once they 'break' they're beyond help." He continued to explain.

"Like those soldiers we saw you put down that first night we were brought here." Sumiko concluded.

"Yes. This is the Shinsengumi's secret, one only our top leaders know." He said, confirming her suspicions. "But now, you've learned it."

"!" Chizuru gasped, while Sumiko tightened her fists. Hijikata stared stoically at the two girls in front of him. Chizuru began to tremble, but Sumiko held his gaze. The only thing that gave away her anxiety was the fact that she was clenching her fists so tightly in her lap, that her knuckles had turned white.

"You may be useful in looking for Koudou-san, but we won't be troubled should you disappear. Any unsettling activity on your part, and you'll be instantly killed." He stated coldly. "Keep that firmly in mind."

"Huh?" Chizuru said, raising her head. "Then, weâ€¦"

"I ain't killing you yet." Hijikata said.

"But it's still on the list?" Sumiko said grimly as she continued to stare back at him, just as Chizuru started to relax.

"After all, you can die whenever, and it'll be fine." Hijikata stated coolly, closing his eyes.

"Haiâ€¦" Chizuru said. He opened his eyes and looked at Sumiko.

"Understood." Sumiko replied curtly. Hijikata held her gaze for a moment before looking away. He stood up and crossed the room to open

the door. Chizuru followed him out onto the porch, but Sumiko stayed where she was. She could hear them just fine through the open door as they continued to speak.

"San'nan-san, entrusted with looking after the medicine, continued to develop it." Hijikata told Chizuru as he stared up at the moon. "He tried to make it heal his arm while keeping his reason intact, but that was the result. You may have only know him after he'd become a bastard, but San'nan-san was very skilled, a genius. Since before there was a Shinsengumi, he's been like a big brother to me." He paused as a cold breeze rustled through the courtyard. His eyes shined in the moonlight. "We need San'nan-san. We can't lose him."

"It'll be all right." Chizuru said. He glanced down at her. "San'nan-san will definitely be all right!" She said earnestly.

"Yeah." He said after a moment, allowing his expression to soften slightly. "All we can do now is bet that his spirit will prevail over the medicine." He glanced at the door, expecting to see Sumiko there, smiling reassuringly at them. But she wasn't. He could just make out the silhouette of her form, still sitting perfectly still in the darkness, right where he had left her. She was staring at the floor, avoiding his gaze. He closed his eyes and looked away, feeling troubled again. He had pushed her too far. "Get some sleep." He told Chizuru, furrowing his brow, as he turned and walked away.

"Good night, Hijikata-san!" Chizuru called after him, smiling slightly, as she turned and walked back into their room. "Don't worry, Sumiko-san, I'm sure S-Sumiko-san?" She froze when she got close enough to see that the older girl was actually trembling, and tears had begun to stream down her face. Chizuru stared at her, stunned. She didn't know what to do. She had never seen her friend like this before. Sumiko never cried! "I-It's all right, Sumiko-san!" Chizuru cried, wrapping her arms around the older girl as she started to sob.

"N-No it's not!" Sumiko cried, burying her face against Chizuru's shoulder as she clung to her. "He blames me! San'nan-san was so important to him, and I! It's my fault!" She sobbed heavily, unable to stop herself now that the floodgates were open. "He hates me! It's all my fault!"

"I-It's not!" Chizuru said urgently, also starting to cry. Sumiko was usually so tough, but she was very sensitive when it came to the welfare of her patients and people she cared about. "It's not Sumiko-san's fault! I'm sure Hijikata-san doesn't you! H-He's just worried, that's all! D-Don't cry, Sumiko-san!" She sobbed. The two friends continued to cling to each other as they cried together, enough to cover everything they had been holding back over the past year, or in Sumiko's case, the past three.

## 19. Bitter Medicine

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 19: Bitter Medicine<br>\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>"Ah, this sucks." Sumiko mumbled as she held a cool cloth over her face. Her eyes were still raw from all the crying she had done the previous night. "Chizuru's so luckyâ€| no puffy eyes at all!" It must be thanks to her special healing abilitiesâ€| Before meeting Chizuru, she had thought <em>she<em> healed abnormally fast, but Chizuru was on an entirely different level. She thought it was pretty amazing, but she understood why Chizuru and her father might want to keep it secret since a lot of people were still really superstitious in this era, and there could also be people who might want to exploit an ability like thatâ€| Like the way the Bakufu wanted this Ochimizu.

The cloth slipped from Sumiko's hands as her eyes widened when a terrible thought suddenly occurred to her. Was it really just a coincidence that Chizuru, a girl with unbelievable healing abilities, was the daughter of a man who knew how to create a medicine capable of doing the same thing to a regular human who wasn't born withâ€|? She shook her head. No. No way! Koudou loved Chizuru. There was no way he would test something like that on his own daughter!

"Agh! Pull yourself together, Sumiko!" She snapped at herself, clapping her hands against the side of her face to wake herself up. "â€| Okay, \_Ow.\_" That had definitely been too hardâ€| Great, now she probably had red marks in the shape of handprints off of her face, too!

"What's Aniki doing over there by himself?" One of the men whispered to his friend as they watched from a safe distance. They had been passing by coincidence, when they happened to spot Sumiko sitting all by herself.

"A one man comedy routine?" His friend suggested. They exchanged a glance.

"Yeah, that's probably it." They decided, continuing on their way. Aniki was cool like that.

â€"â^žâ€"

"Hey, sorry for the waitâ€|" Sumiko said as she entered the Kitchen. Chizuru had gone ahead to get started on making the tea while she tried to fix her face without the miracle of makeup.

"It's all right. The tea is ready. Now we just have toâ€|" Chizuru said, smiling wryly, as she turned. "â€| Sumiko-san, did you pink your cheeks?" Sumiko hung her head.

"Oh, whatever! I give up." She said, throwing her hands in the air. "Let's go bring them their tea before they start assuming we're up to some sort of 'unsettling activity'."

â€"â^žâ€"

The atmosphere in the room was heavy and tense as Kondo, Hijikata, and all of the captains aside from Okita, who was still guarding San'nan-san. They were all anxiously waiting to hear further news

from him on the deputy-commander.

"Pardon us." Chizuru said, sliding open the door, so she and Sumiko could serve the tea. The girls, sensing the tense atmosphere, entered and carried out their task quietly. Chizuru served one side of the room, while Sumiko served the other. When Sumiko reached Hijikata, she set down his cup with her usual grace, but she kept her eyes down, avoiding his gaze as he watched her every move. She deep down, she was still afraid that if she made eye contact with him, she would see that cold and heartless look in his eyes, that it was being reserved for her.

Hijikata didn't know what to think as he watched her retract her hand and leave to sit off to the side with Chizuru. She had served him his tea without complaint, but she still wouldn't look at him. He furrowed his brow, silently berating himself. He should have expected this. Even though it was important to give the girls a scare to show them just how much danger they were in, he knew what an oppositional and stubborn personality Sumiko had. He pushed when he should have pulled. He had not only threatened her life, but he had used her affection for Chizuru to force her to listen to him. She was sure to hold a grudge for that, if nothing else.

The door to the inner room slid open, revealing a smiling Okita and Inoue.

"Looks like San'nan-san is out of the woods." He announced without preamble, much their collective relief.

"He's quieted down." Inoue added as he followed Okita into the room, closing the door behind them, before sitting down and joining the others. "He's still asleep." They all heaved a sigh of relief and finally allowed themselves to relax.

"So, did San'nan-san do it?" Shinpachi asked.

"We won't know for sure until he awakens." Inoue said. "To the eye, he's no different from yesterday."

\_SLIDE.\_

They all glanced up when the outside door slid open without warning, revealing Itou.

"Good morning." He greeted everyone politely.

"Geh!" Shinpachi said as he and nearly everyone in the room involuntarily flinched upon remembering they still had yet another problem to deal with.

"!" Okita started coughing. Sumiko narrowed her eyes slightly. She didn't like the sound of that cough.

"You all right, Souji?" Sano asked.

"Yeah." He said, chagrined. "The air's kind of stale in here, so Iâ€¦"

"Oh, my. A brisk morning like this, yet all your faces appear uneasy." Itou observed. "Could this have something to do with the

disturbance last night?"

"Uh, well, that isâ€¦" Kondo said hesitantly, fumbling hopelessly for an adequate response that would protect San'nan without actually counting as lying.

"Hey, fool him, Sano!" Shinpachi whispered urgently when he saw that Kondo was about to go up in flames.

"Huh? \_Me\_?" Sano whisper-yelled incredulously. What was \_he\_ supposed to say?

"Hai. Hai. Let's leave that to someone skilled at explaining things." Okita whispered to both of them. All three of them glanced expectantly at Saito. Saito took that as his cue to step in. He stood up and turned to face Itou.

"As you say, Officer Itou, something did occur last night." Saito stated calmly. "Headquarters has yet to return to normal."

"My, I'm sorry to hear that." Itou said, turning to face him.

"Troubling you with this was the last thing that we wished to do. Thus, if we may assess the situation, and inform you of the details this eveningâ€¦" Saito said, bowing respectfully.

"I see." Itou said with a ghost of smirk before turning to face the others. "I understand now. If that's the case, I anxiously await your summons this evening." He told them, stepping out and closing the door behind himself. They held their breath and waited, listening to make sure they could hear his footsteps really leaving. Once they were sure of this, most of the men heaved a huge sigh of relief.

"That's it!" Sumiko said bluntly. "Someone get the salt!" Time to exorcise that bitch. Shinpachi and Sano smiled wryly, glad to see her back to her usual spunky self.

"Seriously. Still, it seems like he cut us some slack on that one." Okita said. "Maybe he just liked how Hajime-kun handled it." He added, smirking.

"It would be nice to think that." Saito said.

"The top staff is all assembled, but San'nan-san ain't here. Itou-san is sure to soon notice that something doesn't add up about that." Hijikata stated seriously.

"Yeah, true enough." Okita said, sighing. "That guy sure is a pain."

"What should we do, Toshi?" Kondo asked. Hijikata was silent.

"â€¦ Um, just a thought, butâ€¦ why don't we try talking to San'nan-san first?" Sumiko ventured, staring down at the floor as they all glanced at her, still too nervous to risk meeting Hijikata's eyes.

"Nn." Hijikata agreed, nodding. "Let's do that." There was no point

in panicking until they knew whether or not there really was something to worry about.

“”

Sumiko gripped her medical kit tight as she followed Hijikata, Kondo, and Okita through the dark hall to the same room she had found Chizuru and San'nan-san in the previous evening.

"San'nan-san!" Kondo said when they opened the door and found the deputy-commander sitting up at his desk, swirling a beaker of red liquid. "You're all right to be up?" He asked as he and Hijikata entered the room and sat down a short distance away from him.

"I'm somewhat lethargic, but I'm sure that's a side-effect of the medicine." San'nan replied.

"What makes you say that?" Sumiko asked as she stepped into the room. She noticed his hair was back to normal.

"Ah, Miyagawa-san." San'nan said, glancing up at her. So were his eyes. "Forgive me, it seems I've caused you quite a lot of trouble."

"I've come to expect that from you." She replied calmly as she kneeled down beside him and set down her medical kit so she could start examining him. "So, you were saying you think lethargy is a side-effect of the medicine?"

"Since taking that medicine, my daily routine has become rather difficult." He replied as Sumiko opened her kit.

"So, in other words," Okita said as he entered the room and took a seat behind Hijikata and Kondo.

"I am no longer human." San'nan finished for him. Sumiko froze momentarily but quickly recovered her wits as she picked up the stethoscope.

"We're just glad you're alive!" Kondo said happily. "That's more than enough!"

"So, did it heal your arm?" Sumiko asked, holding open the front of his kimono while pressing the mouth of the stethoscope to his chest. His heartbeat was slightly elevated.

"Yes, it appears to be healed. At least, it gives me no inconvenience." He replied, smiling wryly. "My, that device seems to be even colder than usual today." He remarked.

"Consider it pay back for almost choking the life out of me." She deadpanned as she put it away. Hijikata's pupils constricted slightly as he stared at her. She never said a word. Hijikata clenched his fists. No, he never bothered to ask.

"But you can't go out during the day, right?" Okita asked. "Can you perform your squad duties like that?" San'nan turned to face the other men while Sumiko pulled up his sleeve and examined his left arm more closely.

"You should just consider me as dead." He told them.

Hijikata's pupils constricted to pinpoints. He was shell-shocked by what he had just heard.

"I think I'll bring together the new Shinsengumi as an example of the medicine's efficacy." San'nan said, smiling. "We were ordered by the Bakufu to keep the medicine secret. If I were dead, the medicine's existence would remain hidden. And if the medicine had no side-effects, no one would hesitate to use it, yes?"

"That's the only way?" Kondo asked.

"Well, this is the path you chose, San'nan-san." Okita said, though he wasn't particularly happy about it. San'nan just continued to smile.

"In that case, talk of moving the headquarters has ceased to be a joke." Hijikata said.

"Hm?" Kondo and Okita said.

"Hiding San'nan-san from Itou's men will require a very large headquarters." Hijikata explained. Sumiko blinked as she suddenly remembered something from history.

"San'nan-san, don't take this the wrong way, but would you mind committing seppuku?" She asked, earning herself some strange looks from the men. "I was just think of what we're supposed to tell Itou-san later!" She explained quickly.

"Ah, I see." San'nan said. "Yes, that could work."

"Maybe I could be your second?" Okita said with a slight smirk.

"You would say that, wouldn't you?" Sumiko asked, sweat-dropping, as she glanced at him past Hijikata.

â€"â^žâ€"

Later that evening, after having had to endure the arduous task of informing Itou of San'nan-san's supposed seppuku, and then having to sit through a meal where Sumiko continuously avoided eye contact with him, Hijikata had enough. He marched over to where Sumiko was washing the dishes by the well with Chizuru, and grabbed Sumiko by the wrist.

"!" She gasped, startled, when he started to drag her away. She sent a Chizuru a look for help.

"I'm borrowing her." Hijikata informed Chizuru stiffly as he continued on his way, pulling Sumiko along.

"H-Hai." Chizuru said, a little caught off guard.

'You traitorâ€|!' Sumiko thought, chagrined. Hijikata didn't stop until they had gone some distance away.

"I'm sorry!" Sumiko shouted at the same Hijikata turned and said:

"I'm sorry."

For a moment they just stared at each other in surprise.

"Huh? Wait, I'm confusedâ€|" Sumiko said.

"That's my line." Hijikata said. "Why are you apologizing? You've been avoiding looking me in the eye ever since last night. Aren't you angry with me for how I treated you?"

"â€| Yes, now that you mention it." Sumiko said slowly. "But to be honest, I was more worried that you might hate me."

"Hate you?" Hijikata said, furrowing his brow. "Why would I hate you?"

"I thoughtâ€| I thought that maybe if I'd been able to do more for San'nan-san, then he wouldn't have felt so pushed to take the medicine. I was the doctor in charge of his recovery. That makes me responsible for him." She said. "I was afraid you would blame meâ€| and that if I looked you in the eye, I'd see it."

"I don't blame you." He said. "And I don't hate you."

"Okayâ€| Then why do you look so troubled?" She asked. The more she had tried to explain her reason for apologizing, the harder his expression had become.

"Because I made you think that way." He replied. Sumiko blinked.

"That's all? What about all the other stuff?" She asked.

"I thought you weren't mad about that." He said, furrowing his brow.

"I wasn't, until you reminded me." She huffed, crossing her arms. As Hijikata stared at her, her frown curved up into a light smirk. "But I'm sure I'll think of some way you can make it up to me."

"Who says I want to?" He asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You did. You were already apologizing for something before you even knew why I was apologizing, so therefore, all I have to say is this: apology accepted." She said, grinning like a Cheshire cat, as she pranced off happily.

"Hn. Cheeky womanâ€|" Hijikata said, smiling wryly.

## 20. Reflection

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 20: Reflection<strong>

\* \* \*



><p>Six months later, the Shinsengumi forcibly relocated to the Nishi Hongwanji Temple, which had been cooperative with the Choshu clan.<p>

"Ah, it's such a beautiful day." Sumiko said, smiling, as she paused her sweeping to stretch in the spring sunshine. The cherry blossoms were already in full bloom. When the wind blew, it sent a light spray of pink petals fluttering on the breeze.

"Yes." Chizuru agreed, smiling cheerfully, as she swept the walkway.

"And I can't believe how huge this place is." Sumiko added, glancing around at the vast, open expanse of a courtyard they were in. I feel like if I shout there'll be an echo!"

"Sometimes, I think you like being scolded by Hijikata-san." Saito stated calmly from behind, getting their attention.

"Ah, Saito-san. Is it time to eat?" Sumiko asked.

"Yes. Itou-san and most of his men have left already." He replied. His group had decided to eat out to celebrate the acquisition of their new headquarters.

"Okay, I'll go get San'nan-san!" Chizuru said brightly. It had been a while since they were all able to eat together.

"All right." Sumiko said, taking her broom so she could put it away with hers. She smiled as she watched Chizuru run off before following Saito inside.

~\*~

"San'nan-san! The food is ready!" Chizuru announced cheerfully when she found him sitting in the shade of one of the buildings away from the main living quarters.

"Ah. It's you, eh? Thank you." He said, standing up. As he stepped down to join her, Chizuru could have sworn his hair had turned white for a moment. "Is something the matter?" He asked calmly.

"Uh, no. Nothing at all." Chizuru said quickly.

"Well then." San'nan said, walking ahead.

~\*~

\*\*July 3, 1865\*\*

Shortly after the headquarters moved, Heisuke finally returned from Edo. As a result, Chizuru went on patrol with his group, so they could catch up, while Sumiko went with Okita.

"Any luck, Aniki?" One of the men in Okita's division asked when Sumiko returned from asking questions about Koudou-san.

"No." Sumiko replied, sighing. She blinked. "Oi, Okita, why is even your group calling me that now?"

"Hm? Oh. I ordered them to." Okita replied.

"Can I ask why?" She asked, furrowing her brow slightly.

"Because it annoys you." He replied with smirk.

"Ah. I see. I should have knownâ€¦" She said, sweat-dropping. "I bet you're just upset 'cause you got stuck with me instead of Chizuru."

"I bet you were dropped on the head as a child." He said.

"I bet you were dropped on the head and bounced out the window." She retorted.

"They get along well, don't they?" Another in the back whispered to a friend as they watched their friendly exchange of banter.

"At least I landed in a puddle of awesome." Okita said, smirking, as a familiar voice called out to them.

"Souji!"

They glanced over to see Heisuke waving at them. Chizuru smiled and bowed in greeting. They were already back at the meeting place.

"How're things for you?" Heisuke asked Okita. While the two groups walked together.

"Well, same as always." Okita replied. "But I think things will get busy when the Shogun comes to visit."

"Visit? The Shogun's coming here to the capital?" Chizuru asked.

"Yup. That's why even Kondo-san's on edge." Okita said, smiling.

"Yeah. That he certainly isâ€¦" Heisuke said somewhat distractedly.

"But is really okay, something like that?" Sumiko asked, concerned. "Aren't a lot of people in this city still somewhat anti-Bakufu?" Okita was about to reply when something caught in his throat and he suddenly started coughing.

"K-Koff! Koff!" Okita was bent over and kneeling because of how strong this latest coughing fit was.

"Okita-san!" Sumiko said, turning back as the others halted.

"Are you all right?" Chizuru asked, kneeling down to check on him with Sumiko. He nodded his head as the coughing stopped.

"That's a really nasty cough you've got there." Sumiko said as something caught Okita's attention out the corner of his eye. "I want to examine you when weâ€¦ um, hello?" She asked, slightly chagrined he ignored her and stood up. "What are youâ€¦?" She trailed off as

she, Heisuke, and Chizuru followed his intent gaze and saw that he was staring into a narrow alley where a girl who looked \_a lot\_ like Chizuru was being harassed by two deadbeat thugs.

"Hey, little girl! Who do you think you are to refuse?" Deadbeat A demanded.

"We're out everyday for the people, talkin' about nationalism, so pourin' us patriots a cup or two of liquor is the least you can do, right?" Deadbeat B leered as his friend grabbed her by the wrist.

"Stop! Let go!" The girl said, trying to pull away. Okita and Sumiko furrowed their brows as they went to her aid with Chizuru and Heisuke on their heels.

"Come with us!" Deadbeat A said roughly, as he tried to drag the girl away with the help of his friend.

"Oh, jeez. The word 'nationalism' is wasted bein' used by the likes of you." Okita said, as he stepped up to confront them.

"Men who'd try to force women are the worst." Sumiko stated contemptuously.

"What!\_!\_" Deadbeat B demanded incredulously.

"A pale-blue overcoat?" Deadbeat A said, taking note of Okita's uniform.

"They're with the Shinsengumi!" Deadbeat B exclaimed.

"If you know us, that'll save some time." Okita said, smirking slightly. "What will you do?" He asked, placing a hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Dammit! I'll drink somewhere else!" Deadbeat A cursed as he turned tail and ran away.

"Oh. He's smarter than he looks." Sumiko commented.

"What will \_you\_ do?" Okita asked Deadbeat B pointedly.

"I'll remember this!" He shouted before turning and running after his friend. Chizuru's look alike sighed and took a moment to fix her hair before approaching her rescuers.

"Thank you very much." She said, bowing to show her gratitude. "I am Nagumo Kaoru. She smiled politely as she raised her head again, the perfect picture of a lady. Okita took Chizuru by the hand and moved her into position so that she was standing beside Nagumo-san.

"Eh?" Chizuru said, confused.

"Trust me." Okita said, taking a step back to admire the view. "Sure enough. You look a like, don't you?"

"Really? I don't think they're alike at all." Heisuke said skeptically.

"No, they are." Okita insisted calmly, smirking.

"Yeah. Heisuke-kun, remind me to give you an eye exam when we get back." Sumiko deadpanned. The two girls could've been twins. Nagumo-san glanced sideways at Chizuru and smiled. Chizuru stared back at the other girl, wondering if she really looked that pretty.

"I think if this kid dressed up like a girl, you'd be dead ringers." Okita told Nagumo-san.

"Mm. Almost." Sumiko agreed. The longer she stared at Nagumo-san, the more she was starting to notice the few subtle differences between them. Nagumo-san stepped forward, moving closer to Okita.

"I wish to give you a more proper thanks, but I have other obligations just now. Please pardon my rudeness." She said elegantly, bowing. "I shall repay you some other time, Okita Souji-san of the Shinsengumi." She added she turned to leave.

"Whoa, nice!" Heisuke said as they watched her walk away. "Souji, it looks like she likes you, right?"

"If that's how that looked to you just now, Heisuke, you'll never beat Sano-san." Okita said, smirking, as he turned and walked away.

"Wh-What does that mean!\_?" Heisuke demanded, following after him.

"Poor Heisuke. He's going to get eaten alive if a black widow like that comes after him!" Sumiko commented, smiling wryly. Not to mention, she was pretty sure Nagumo-san was actually a guy! "Oh. Chizuru?" Sumiko said when she glanced back at her friend to see her squatting down in front of a puddle in the road, staring at her reflection.

"Kaoru-san, huh?" Chizuru mused. Sumiko smiled as she squatted down beside her and looked too.

"It's been a while since we've tried looking like girls, huh?" Sumiko said.

"Yeah!" Chizuru said.

"Well, I think I might actually make a better guy, though..." Sumiko added, smiling wryly, as she sweat-dropped.

"Chizuru! Sumiko-san! We're goin' back!" Heisuke called out.

"Coming!" Sumiko said as the two girls stood up and walked over to join them.

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The sun was setting. All the officers and troop members of the Shinsengumi had donned their blue haoris and gathered for a formal assembly.

"I think you've all heard that the 14th Shogun, Tokugawa Iemochi, will be visiting the capital. In accordance with his visit, we Shinsengumi have received orders that, until he reaches Nijo Castle, we are to do our utmost to provide him with protection." Kondo announced proudly.

Many of the men gasped in amazement and began talking excitedly amongst themselves. Chizuru and Sumiko smiled, glad to see that their friends were happy and finally receiving some of the recognition they deserved.

"Given the Ikedaya Incident and the Kinmon Rebellion, sure enough, even the higher-ups have had to acknowledge our accomplishments." Hijikata said with the trace of a satisfied smile.

"To think, in protecting him, the fate of the country lies with our blades." Okita said. "Or something like that."

"Yeah!" Shinpachi said enthusiastically.

"Protecting him here in the capitalâ€¦" Itou said dubiously. "If only San'nan-san were alive. We've lost someone dear, haven't we?" He would talk some sense into them if he were here. Kondo nervously cleared his throat upon hearing that while Hijikata furrowed his brow. He had a lot of nerve invoking San'nan-san's spirit after the way he had treated him before his 'death'â€¦

"Thus, things will be getting busy for us." Kondo continued. "First, we'll have to think of how we'll form our regiments. "Well, thenâ€¦" Toshi and Iâ€¦" Soujiâ€¦"

"My apologies." Hijikata said, interrupting him. "Kondo-san, could you let Souji off this time? He seems like he's catching a cold."

"Hm? Is that so, Souji?" Kondo asked as he glanced at the young captain, concerned. "You okay?"

"Personally, I don't think it's a problem." Okita said, frowning slightly. "Hijikata-san is overreacting." He added, looking like he was pouting slightly.

"Yes, it is a problem!" Hijikata said firmly. "You were just coughing earlier."

"Oh, jeez. Hijikata-san, you're far too protective." Okita said. He was going to have to have a word with Sumiko.

"What is it, Heisuke?" Kondo asked when he saw that he had his hand raised.

"Uh, Kondo-sanâ€¦ the truth is, I'm not feelin' well, either." Heisuke said a bit hesitantly. Sumiko furrowed her brow slightly in concern. She hadn't noticed anything was wrong with him.

"What? Heisuke, you have a cold, too?" Kondo asked, concerned and disappointed. "On an occasion like this, I wanted us all to go greet the Shogun together."

"Um, sorry." Heisuke apologized weakly.

"No, your health takes precedent." Kondo said, smiling. "There will be another chance. When it comes, I want you two to do your best." Chizuru smiled, though Sumiko was still concerned by Heisuke's uncharacteristic behavior. They both glanced up as Hijikata approached them.

"So, what will you do?" He asked them. Sumiko smiled wryly. Did he even have to ask?

"Huh?" Chizuru asked. Sumiko sweat-dropped. Apparently, he did.

"Don't act the fool." Hijikata said. "I'm asking if you'll act in his protection."

"U-Us, too?" Chizuru asked.

"Chizuru, why are you so surprised?" Sumiko asked, smiling wryly. Hadn't they been fighting on their side for awhile, now?

"But—" Chizuru said, glancing at Kondo-san.

"We don't mind, of course." Kondo said, smiling at them. "It's no exaggeration to say you and Miyagawa-san have become members of the Shinsengumi, Yukimura-kun. If you don't mind, be sure to participate."

"Yes, sir!" Sumiko said, smiling brightly.

"Eh?" Chizuru said, glancing at her friend. Really? Just like that? Wasn't this something really important and dangerous?

"Well, there'll be no worry about your life." Okita told her. "There aren't that many ne'er-do-wells who'd be stupid enough to go after the Shogun. And you'll have your 'Aniki' there to look out for you." He added to ruffle Sumiko's feathers. He smirked when she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Why not go, just give it a try?" Heisuke said.

"Okay!" Chizuru said, perking up, as she finally gave in. "If there's any way I can help, please let me do so."

## 21. Devil In The Dark

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 21: Devil In The Dark<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Later that evening, Sumiko and Chizuru found themselves guarding the front of the gate of Nijo Castle with Hijikata and several other Shinsengumi members while the Shogun rested within. Chizuru bowed to Hijikata after receiving her orders and ran off to spread the message while Sumiko remained behind with the others at the gate.<p>

"Next shift watchmen, take the Hour of the Boar, please!" Chizuru called out.

"She seemed so hesitant to come at first, but she looks like she's enjoying herself." Sumiko commented, smiling, as she watched the younger girl disappear into the distant darkness further down the wall lined with soldiers. "Are you sure you don't need me to do anything?" She asked, glancing up at him.

"You are doing something." Hijikata reminded her, slightly chagrined. "You're standing guard, remember? Until your skills as a medic are needed, you're here for your muscle."

"Oh, right." Sumiko said, smiling wryly. Muscle? What happened to 'you're a girl, too'? "I guess I've just gotten used to having to do more running around whenever Iâ€"!" Sumiko's smile fell as she suddenly whipped her head back around to stare in the direction Chizuru had just gone in.

"What is it?" Hijikata asked, instantly on the alert after seeing the alarmed look on her face.

"This feelingâ€" there's something dangerous down there! Chizuru's in trouble!" Sumiko yelled, taking off like a shot, without waiting for Hijikata.

â€"!"

" 'Oni'? A-Are you making fun of me?" Chizuru asked, staring up Kazama, the red-haired man who was with him on the bridge, and a tan man with purple hair who was holding a gun. They had just suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and now they were claiming to be demons? Who were these people!\_?"

"Hmph. You don't know about Oni?" Kazama asked. He found that hard to believe. "Are you honestly saying that? You are one of us, Yukimura Chizuru."

"!" Chizuru gasped. "How do you know my name?"

"Your wounds heal so fast, how could anyone possibly think you a normal human?" The red-haired man asked, suddenly appearing behind her without a sound. Chizuru spun around, but he was already gone.

"Well, in that caseâ€" wouldn't it be faster just to prove it?" The man with the gun asked, aiming it at her from his perch up on the high wall.

\_SLIDE!\_

"Oh?" The gunman said, smirking when Sumiko came running up and slid into place in front of Chizuru with her sword drawn, shielding her friend.

"Try it, if you think you can." Sumiko dared, glaring fiercely up at him. Chizuru gasped when he smirked and cocked his gun.

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru gasped.

"Stop it, Shiranui." Kazama said as he stared down the girls. The gunman laughed and holstered his weapon with a shrug. Too bad, it might've been interesting. "You sensed us from that far away, huh?" He asked Sumiko. "If didn't know any better, I might think you were the pure blood. It's a shame you're only half Oni."

"What?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow.

"Oi, Oi. Don't tell me you don't know what you are, either?" Shiranui asked. Were these girls dense or what?

"Hnh. I'm more surprised she wasn't killed at birth." Kazama said.

"I very nearly was." Sumiko replied grimly with a dark smirk, starting to feel pissed off. "An 'oni', huh? I suppose that might be reason enough for a mother to abandon her child. Not that I believe in that kind of thing."

"Ahaha! Can you believe this woman?" Shiranui asked. "The real thing is right in front of her, and she still has doubts!" The red-haired man was silent as he stared down at her.

"You can accept it or deny it, but our actions will not change." Kazama told her before glancing at Chizuru. "I will keep this brief: the surname that proves you're an Oni, the short sword of the Oni of the East—those alone are proof enough."

'Surname? What does 'Yukimura' have to do with it? And what about my sword?' Chizuru thought, confused. Sumiko furrowed her brow. She was just as lost as Chizuru on this one.

"I'll say this in advance. We don't need your permission to take you with us." Kazama added leaping up and off of the wall, landing effortlessly in front of them. Sumiko's eyes widened. A normal human's leg bones would've been shattered. He smirked when he straightened up and saw the look on her face. "I can see you're starting to get it. Female Oni are precious. Even a mongrel like you has worth. Come with us." He said, holding out his hand to them.

\_SMACK!\_

The sound from Sumiko slapping his hand away resounded through the night. Shiranui whistled. Now she'd done it. Kazama's pupils constricted to slits as he narrowed his crimson eyes at her.

"No thanks! You really don't know how to talk to women do you?" She asked. "Don't you know you're only supposed to praise them if you want to get on their good side?" She asked, glaring scornfully at him. "As if I'd go with someone who just called me a mongrel. And there's no way I'd let a bastard like you take Chizuru, either. Not after you caused her to get hurt on purpose!"

"Hmph. 'Mongrel' is too good for you." Kazama said, glaring at her with eyes full of disdain and anger, though he was somewhat impressed that she had noticed he let go on purpose when neither of the other two who were with her had. "How would you like for me to make your



life a living hell?" He asked dangerously, narrowing his eyes.

"I'm not really ready for marriage yet. But thanks for the offer." Sumiko replied dryly, narrowing her eyes back at him.

"Heh! She just doesn't quit, does she?" Shiranui commented, impressed by her nerve. "Hey, if you don't want her, I'll take her."

"\_You mongrel!\_" Kazama growled lowly, about to grab her by that annoying mouth of hers and crush it, when he suddenly found himself having to dodge the pointy end of a spear.

"Now, now." Sano said as he and Saito moved into position to protect the girls. "Having a lovers' date in an unromantic place like this a bad choice."

"He's a terrible sweet-talker, too." Sumiko added.

"You all again, eh?" Kazama asked condescendingly as he and the other two Oni fell took a more advantageous oppositional position. "It seems you countryside dogs are quick-witted if nothing else."

"That would be my line." Saito replied sternly, noticing the red-haired man he had encountered during the Kinmon Rebellion that had claimed to be the one who beat Heisuke at the Ikedaya, that Amagiri Kyuju.

"Harada-san! Saito-san!" Chizuru said, relieved. She looked up when she felt someone place their hand on her shoulder.

"Fall back." Hijikata said. "You, too." He told Sumiko, holding an arm out in front of her, pushing the stubborn girl back, as he placed himself in front of her. "I thought you'd come after the head of the Shogun." Hijikata said, smirking dangerously as he eyed their opponents. "Just what do you want with these kids?"

"The Shogun and you fools are no longer of importance." Kazama replied loftily. "This is a problem for us Oni."

"Oni, you say?" Hijikata asked, furrowing his brow. What was that supposed to mean?

"Would you mind simply leaving?" Amagiri asked calmly. "As with the time at Kinmon, we have no reason to fight you."

"Unfortunately, I have a reason to fight you." Saito replied, furrowing his brow.

"It can't be helpedâ€¦" Amagiri said calmly, leaping up and over to stand on the high wall behind Saito. Sano used his spear to pole-vault onto the wall with Shiranui.

"Heh. I haven't seen your ugly mug since the Kinmon Rebellion." Sano said, raising his spear to challenge the gunman.

"Hah! My gun versus your spear." Shiranui said, aiming for Sano's head. "At this range, can you not see which is more effective?"

" 'Shiranui', was it? Don't go puttin' on airs and dropping your guard!" Sano shouted, lunging forth as he thrust his spear at his

opponent in a blitz of attacks.

"You ain't reaching me!" Shiranui taunted as he repeatedly dodged each attack.

"!" Sano grunted as he lunged forward again, closing the gap between them. Shiranui grinned. They were locked in position, both men had frozen with their weapons only an inch away from the other's forehead. Sano smirked.

"Why don't you fire?" He asked.

"Usin' bullets on someone who's heard a gunshot before is no fun." Shiranui replied with a smirk of his own.

Hijikata, Sumiko, and Chizuru were locked in a stare-down with Kazama. Chizuru's hand trembled as she reached for the handle of her sword.

"There's no need for that." Yamazaki said, pushing Chizuru behind himself protectively.

"Yamazaki-san!" Chizuru said.

"Come back to headquarters with me." Yamazaki said.

"Yeah. Let Yamazaki-san take you somewhere safe, Chizuru." Sumiko said, nodding in approval.

"You go, too." Hijikata told Sumiko firmly, furrowing his brow. "He's after both of you, isn't he?"

"You country fools, playing warriors!" Kazama roared as he drew his sword, fed up with all their constant interfering.

"Hijikata-san!" Sumiko yelled as he rushed forward to block the attack with his own sword rather than let Kazama take another step closer to the girls.

"Don't interfere!" Yamazaki said, holding out an arm to stop her.

"Butâ€¦!"

"What business do you bastards have with these kids!\_?" Hijikata demanded, glaring fiercely at Kazama. Beads of sweat formed on Hijikata's brow. He had to use both hands just to fend off a one-handed blow from the oni.

"Chizuru is far too noble for you. So, we're taking her with us. That's all." Kazama replied haughtily with a wicked smirk. "You can keep that mongrel, though. She's a good fit with you dogs of the Bakufu."

"What's that supposed to mean!\_?" Hijikata asked angrily, gritting his teeth, as he summoned all his strength and pushed back so he could launch an attack of his own. Sumiko clenched her fists as she watched them parry each other's blows. She wanted to help, however, she knew Yamazaki was right. Interfering in such a fierce battle now would insult Hijikata's pride as a warrior... But the look on

Kazama's face. It was like watching a cat playing with its next meal. Fortunately, she didn't have to suffer long through this internal debate, because they could hear the pounding footsteps of more soldiers approaching. Hijikata blocked Kazama's attack and struck back with a swift sweep of his blade, slicing off the tips of the oni's bangs so close to his face, that he almost graced the bridge of his nose even as the oni jumped back.

"Oh?" Kazama said, slightly impressed. No human had ever come that close to actually cutting his flesh before.

"Fighting anymore than this serves no purpose. Drawing things out will attract unwanted attention, which is not good." Amagiri said, signaling to his fellow oni that it was time to go.

"Now that we have confirmation, we can leave." Kazama said carelessly as he hopped up on top of the wall, out of Hijikata's reach.

"Tch." Shiranui clicked his tongue in disappointment. Just when it was getting good.

"Haah!" Sano grunted as he dodges Shiranui final parting shot and swiped at the fleeing oni with his spear.

"You think we'll simply let you flee?" Saito asked sternly, charging at Amagiri.

\_SLASH!\_

In a moment too fast for the human eye to process, Saito had drawn his sword cut Amagiri down, or so he thought.

"!" He gasped, stunned, when his opponent suddenly vanished into thin air, as if he had never been there in the first place.

"We'll be back for you in the near future." Kazama told Chizuru as he looked down on them from above. He smirked. "Just wait for us."

"Ah." Chizuru gasped. Sumiko placed a hand on Chizuru's shoulder and glared defiantly up at Kazama. Without further ado, the despicable oni leaped up in to sky and disappeared from sight.

"Chizuru!" Sumiko said, catching the younger girl when her knees started to buckle. Not this again!

"Chizuru! Are you all right?" Sano asked.

"Hey, you two." Hijikata said, glancing back the girls. "Can you think of why they might be after you?"

"Well, he seemed to have changed his mind about me half way through." Sumiko said, glancing at Chizuru, wondering how they should handle this. Personally, she wouldn't mind telling Hijikata how crazy those inhuman bastards were, but Chizuru had more riding on this than she did, and it would mean exposing a secret that she had promised to help keep nearly three years ago.

"No, I don't get it." Chizuru replied quietly as she leaned on her friend, clearly distraught by the life-shattering knowledge she

had just acquired about her own background. Hijikata furrowed his brow. They were holding something back, and he knew it.

## 22. Health Inspection

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 22: Health Inspection<strong>

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><p>"Just forget about that creep." Sumiko told Chizuru gently as she sat beside her on the porch, once they were safely back at headquarters. Chizuru stared down at the short sword resting in her lap, the one Kazama had claimed was an oni's sword. "Just because he knew your name and you-know-what doesn't mean he knows everything."<p>

"Mn." Chizuru said somberly, still worried. She didn't know how Sumiko could be so calm about something like thisâ€| What if they really \_were\_ oni?

The girls were startled when someone began coughing very loudly and violently not too far away. They peeked out from around the corner and saw Okita leaning against the side of another building for support, holding his side as his body shook with every cough. Sumiko furrowed her brow. That guyâ€| She'd warned him before they left not to over do it! What did he think he was doing, wandering around at this time of night?

"Okita-sanâ€|" Chizuru said softly, as she watched him straighten up and walk away.

"Let's go get that fool into bed." Sumiko said, smiling wryly, as she glanced between her friend and #2 stubborn patient. Chizuru smiled slightly and nodded in agreement. Their plans to waylay Okita stopped being so fun when they reached the spot he had just been standing and saw a few small crimson splatters on the tiled walkway.

"Bloodâ€|!" Chizuru gasped.

Sumiko furrowed her brow and bit her lip. It was just as she'd feared. \_It was starting.\_

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"Ah. Good morning, Sumiko-san." Okita said, glancing up from the rice he was boiling for breakfast. "I see the assassins have failed."

"Assassins?" Saito asked, glancing up from the dish he was working on.

"Whatâ€|?" Chizuru asked, blinking in confusion.

"He's still mad at me for giving Hijikata-san a heads up about his cold the other day." Sumiko replied carelessly. "Anyway, sorry,

Saito-san, but I need to borrow Okita for a moment. A sick person shouldn't be breathing all over everyone else's food anyway." She said, grabbing Okita by the back of his kimono so she could drag him away, while Chizuru took his place in the kitchen.

"So, what's so urgent that you had to drag me to some deserted place first thing in the morning? What are you gonna do if Hijikata-san sees and misunderstands?" He teased, leaning closer.

"I told you to stay in bed yesterday." Sumiko said sternly, crossing her arms. She wasn't going to let him get away with changing the subject this time. Besides, it was starting to become painfully obvious that Hijikata didn't see her as a woman, not romantically anyway. He had even made a comment the other day about her being like 'the younger sister he never wanted'. "Remember what I said: if you don't want to take my word for it, that's fine. I've already admitted I don't have any experience with treating this. But I'm only giving you a couple more weeks to get a second opinion. Find yourself a more experienced doctor and start a course of treatment, before I have to tell Hijikata-san what I think you really have."

"Don't threaten me, Sumiko-san." Okita said, narrowing his eyes as his expression darkened. "It won't end well for you." What happened to that so-called 'doctor-patient confidentiality' she promised him?

"Even if you kill me, I won't let you get away with pushing yourself to death." Sumiko stated resolutely. She wasn't going to lose another patient. "Chizuru and I saw the blood."

"What?" Okita asked, furrowing his brow, as he backed off slightly.

"We saw you when you were walking around last night, and you had a coughing fit. We followed you a short distance and saw the blood. I didn't think you'd want Chizuru to see you like that if it got worse, so I made up some excuse and put off your scolding till now."

"â€¦ Thanks."

"You're welcome." Sumiko huffed. "So, anyway, remember to take better care of yourself from now on. There are people who'd be troubled if you died."

"Hai. Hai." Okita replied, smiling wryly, as he started following her back to join the others for breakfast.

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"Stop this! It's disgraceful!"

"Huh? The hell's your problem?" A rough looking samurai asked as he and his buddies stared down the girl who had just told them off. "You got somethin' to say to us pro-imperialist patriots?"

"You all are the worst!" She said, holding onto the crying child they had frightened, trying to calm him down.

"Bitch, what'd you just say!\_?" Chizuru heard the man demand angrily as she passed by with Saito's group on patrol. "Try sayin' that

again!" Without a word, Chizuru rushed off to help. Saito glanced after her and sighed. Not again.

"You all!" Chizuru said, holding out her arm protectively in front of the other girl and little boy as he positioned herself between them and the uppity samurai, giving them a stern look.

"The hell do you want?" One of the men asked.

"Why would you be violent toward women and children?" Chizuru asked. "A samurai's job is to protect the townspeople, isn't it?"

"What'd you say!\_?" The first man shouted angrily as he and his friends drew their swords. Chizuru closed her eyes and flinched, but she remained where she was.

"Aah!"

WHAM! BAM!

"Fear not." Saito said when she opened her eyes and saw that he had already defeated her would-be attackers. "I used the back of my blade. Don't be reckless."

"I'm sorry." Chizuru said, bowing. "Before I knew it, I'dâ€|"

"That's right." The girl she had tried to protect said, agreeing with Saito, as she returned the child to his mother. "I could've handled that on my own."

"Eh? I'm sorry." Chizuru said, bowing. The girl smiled.

"You're a brave one, aren't you? To challenged those rogue samurai. Thank you." She said, also bowing.

"Oh, no! We were saved thanks to Saito-san." Chizuru said humbly. The girl laughed.

"You don't have to be modest." She told Chizuru. It took guts to run in like that. "I think this happened for a reason." She said, smiling as she took Chizuru's hands in her own. "Let's be friends. Two female friends."

"Huh?" Chizuru said, taken aback.

"Oh, was it a secret?" The girl asked, smiling apologetically, as she lowered her voice. Chizuru lowered her head, feeling slightly defeated after having been seen through so easily. "By the way, what's your name?"

"It's Yukimura Chizuru." Chizuru replied quietly as she lifted her head again. The other girl's eyes widened slightly for a brief moment, but she quickly recovered and smiled.

"Nice to meet you, Chizuru-chan." She said. "My name is Sen."

" 'Sen.' Osen-chan." Chizuru said, smiling as she tested out her new friend's name.

"Yup!" Sen said brightly. "Well, let's meet again, Chizuru-chan." She said, smiling as she turned and walked away.

"Um," Chizuru said, turning to Saito, "is my male disguise that obvious?" She asked. Saito stared at her for a moment. He smiled slightly as he turned and started walking back to their group.

"Maybe." He replied.

"W-What does that mean?" Chizuru asked as she ran after him. "Um, Saito-san!"

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"Thanks for letting me come with you, Yamazaki-san." Sumiko said as they walked back to headquarters together, laden with various goods from their shopping trip. "I was starting to run really low on medical supplies."

"Yes, you bought a lot." He remarked, eyeing all the bags of medicine ingredients she was carrying. He had originally only been making a grocery run, but she had somehow managed to convince Hijikata and Kondo to let her go out and get what she needed in person. "By the way, I've heard another doctor will be coming to perform a health inspection today."

"Oh, is that so? Well, good luck to him." She said. "They only listen start listening to me after it's gotten serious, so he'll have his work cut out for him. Hopefully the men will actually listen to this one."

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Later that afternoon, while Sumiko was off working on mixing more medicine in their room, Chizuru was washing the produce that she and Yamazaki had brought back with them by the well when Itou walked by, looking visibly shaken.

"Itou-san? Is something the matter?" Chizuru asked, causing him to stop.

"Of course something is the matter!" He huffed. "As part of the troops' health inspection, that doctor, Matsumoto, tried to forcibly disrobe me!" he exclaimed, covering himself with his arms.

"Matsumoto? You mean, Matsumoto Ryojun-sensei?" Chizuru asked excitedly.

"That may have been the name." Itou said thoughtfully.

"I'll go have a health inspection, too!" Chizuru said as she dashed off to see for herself.

"Hey, wait!" Itou called after them "Youâ€|!" He smiled wryly as he watched her go. It must be someone she knew for her to be so excited.

Chizuru and ran to the room she had seen all the men filing into

earlier.

"Oh!" Chizuru gasped when they reached the open doorway and saw all the men lined up, with the tops of their kimono down.

"Matsumoto-sensei!" Chizuru said when she spotted the familiar older man sitting down at the front of the line, performing the inspections.

"All right, next." Matsumoto said.

"Yeah, if you please, Doc!" Shinpachi said, stepping up for his turn. "Whaddya think?" He asked as he began flexing his muscles in different poses. "This body of mine was forged and forged again through the sword arts!"

"Yeah, Shinpatsu's body is strong and tough." Heisuke commented from further down the line. "It's his head that needs lookin' at."

"Huh?" Shinpachi said as he whipped his head around. "Talk like that, and I'll strangle ya, Heisuke!"

"Hehe!" Heisuke laughed, smirking, as he turned his back on his older friend. Shinpachi finally took a seat so Matsumoto-sensei could examine him. After checking all the usual vital points and his mouth, Matsumoto sat back and announced his verdict.

"Nagakura Shinpachi is! Okay, no problem. Next."

"Hey, Doc! You gotta give me a better look!" Shinpachi protested.

"No, not at all. You're the picture of health." Matsumoto replied.

"Shinpachi! There are others behind you, so hurry and move on!" Sano scolded him. He was even further back in the line than Heisuke.

"That ain't what I mean! There are other places you can check out, right?" Shinpachi asked. Places that were too embarrassing to show a female doctor!

"These checkups are for him to look at us, not for you to show off." Said Saito, who was right behind him. "Hurry up and move." Shinpachi reluctantly got up and stalked away, sulking, however, he paused when Sano flexed his arm as he passed by.

"Hnh!" Shinpachi grunted, striking a pose as he flexed both arms in response to the friendly challenge. The two of them began competing to see who could strike the best pose to show off their muscles. Chizuru stared at them for a moment, stunned, but then she smiled and let out a quiet laugh. Those two really were got along well, didn't they?



I own nothing but my OC.

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## ><p><strong>Chapter 23: Clearing the Air<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh, Sumiko-san!" Chizuru said, perking up when the older girl came to help her carry the washed vegetables back inside. "Guess what, Matsumoto-sensei is here!"<p>

"Eh? Really?" Sumiko asked, blinking in surprise. "I knew another doctor was coming, but I never thought it would be him. I should have asked Yamazaki-san for more detailsâ€¦ Still, this is good! It'll be nice to see an old friend, and he may know something about Koudou-san." She added with a smile. "We'll have to drop in on him once he's finished with the health inspection."

"Un!" Chizuru agreed, smiling excitedly.

â€"â^žâ€"

"Matsumoto-sensei, How did the checkups go?" Kondo asked as he entered to room the inspections had been conducted in while Matsumoto-sensei was packing up his medical kit, having just finished with the last man. He glanced up at Kondo and sighed.

"If you add up the sick and wounded, it's almost a third of the troops, isn't it?" Matsumoto replied.

"What's that!\_?" Kondo exclaimed, taken aback.

"Don't 'What's that!\_?' me, Kondo-san!" Matsumoto said, standing up to confront the Shinsengumi's Commander. "What have you all been doing!\_? From sores to loose bowels! Your HQ is an exhibition of illness, I say!"

"An exhibition of illnessâ€¦?" Kondo asked, startled.

"First, prepare a sick room and carry your ill there. Disinfect all your clothes! Get this headquarters cleaned now!" Matsumoto ordered sternly. "And in the future, listen to Miyagawa-kun \_before\_ it gets this bad!" He knew she and Chizuru were there, and there was no way she would have let it get this far without at least warning the men first. Did these fools not take her advice simply because she was a woman? She might be a bit eccentric at times, but she was an excellent doctor who had even taught Koudou and himself a thing or two.

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"Today, we shall spend the day performing a major cleaning!" Kondo announced once he and Hijikata had gathered all the men once again.

"Eh!\_?" They all exclaimed in dismay, grumbling amongst themselves.

"It's about damn time!" Sumiko said, nodding in approval. Thank goodness for Matsumoto-sensei. Chizuru smiled and laughed a little at the stark contrast in reactions.

The rest of the day was devoted to cleaning out the headquarters until it was spotless. Sumiko and Chizuru helped with this while Matsumoto-sensei tended to his patients in the sick room. Everyone was pitching in. Quite frankly, the amount of rubbish and refuse they ended up sweeping out and having to dispose of was staggering. Still, they were managing to make progress in the momentous task of cleaning out the huge temple surprisingly fast with everyone working together. Chizuru and Sumiko had just finished putting away some of the plates they had washed when they happened upon Heisuke. He was sitting by himself in the shade of the building, looking kind of desponded.

"Heisuke-kun." Sumiko said getting his attention. He glanced up to find both girls staring at him with concern.

"Are you not feeling well, yet?" Chizuru asked, remembering how he had said he was feeling sick before, when the Shogun came to the capital. Sumiko raised an eyebrow and stared knowingly at him. He could tell she knew he had been faking it before, so he might as well fess up.

"Eh? Uh, nah, the truth is I never felt bad." Heisuke admitted a bit hesitantly before looking back down. "I justâ€¦ didn't wanna protect the Shogun."

"Eh?" Chizuru said, surprised.

"I see. I thought as much." Sumiko said, sitting down beside him. "Wanna talk about it? It's obviously troubling you." Heisuke glanced between her and Chizuru. He couldn't talk to the others about this, but maybe they would understand.

"The Shinsengumi's original goal was to keep the peace in Kyoto. But suddenly, it's like we're the Bakufu's retainersâ€¦ I couldn't get excited about it." He explained regretfully. " 'What is it I wanted to do?' I've been thinkin' about thatâ€¦"

"So that's itâ€¦" Chizuru said quietly, bowing her head. She hadn't realized at all, that Heisuke was struggling with something so heavyâ€¦

"Ah! But you don't gotta worry, Chizuru!" Heisuke said quickly when he noticed how down she looked. "No matter what guys come attack us, as long as I'm here, I won't let 'em lay a finger on ya." He stated confidently in an attempt to reassure her.

"Un." Chizuru said, smiling slightly. She was glad to see him looking more energetic. "Thank you."

"Good for you, Chizuru." Sumiko said, smiling, to hide the apprehension she felt. If she was remembering right, then soon, Heisuke wouldâ€¦ but she could be wrong. After all, she had only ever paid enough attention in history to get a passing grade. She hoped she was.

â€œ"â^žâ€œ"

It was late in the afternoon, and the girls were picking up the last of the plates they had left out to dry in the sun. They looked up when they heard someone approaching.

"Matsumoto-sensei." Chizuru said.

"Thank you for your hard work." Sumiko said, smiling sympathetically as she bowed her head in greeting, knowing full well how difficult that rowdy bunch of rough guys could be.

"Long time no see." He said, smiling wryly down at the two girls. "Let's go somewhere more private to catch up."

That somewhere more private turned out to be Kondo-san's room. Sumiko guessed he probably wanted to keep an eye on them to make sure they didn't say too much about a certain medicine.

"Miyagawa-kun. Chizuru-kun. At last we meet." Matsumoto-sensei said. "I'm grateful to Kondo-san."

"I was aware that Matsumoto-sensei and Koudou-san were on friendly terms." Kondo said. "I thought we might turn up a clue"

'Oh, so we both had the same idea' Sumiko thought.

"Thank you both for your consideration." Chizuru said as they both bowed to show their appreciation.

"I received Miyagawa-kun's letter, but I never learned what's most important, your location." Matsumoto said. "There was no way for me to contact you."

"Ah, sorry. I didn't know we when or where were moving when I wrote it." Sumiko apologized, smiling a bit sheepishly.

"Incidentally, Matsumoto-sensei," Chizuru began tentatively, "my father"

"Unfortunately, I don't know Koudou-san's location, either." Matsumoto informed them regretfully.

"Oh, I see" Chizuru said, hanging her head in disappointment. Sumiko placed a supportive hand on her shoulder. "Matsumoto-sensei, please tell me!" Chizuru said suddenly, raising her head. "My father Did my father really research that medicine?" She asked anxiously, nearly causing Sumiko to face-fault.

"Chizuru!" Sumiko said, startled. Wasn't that supposed to be a secret!\_?

Matsumoto's eyes widened slightly in surprise. He glanced questioningly at Kondo. Kondo nodded.

"Your being here brought the two of you in proximity of the medicine, didn't it?" Matsumoto asked.

"What the so you already knew?" Sumiko asked, relieved they hadn't blown their cover, but slightly chagrined. This didn't seem to be nearly as much of a secret as Hijikata had made it sound

"Yes. What Koudou-san undertook with the Shinsengumi was an experiment, by the Bakufu's orders to create Rasetsus." Matsumoto began explaining. " 'Rasetsu' referred to humans with superhuman powers and unbelievable healing abilities. The medicine that brought forth the Rasetsus is the Ochimizu. In the West, it's called the Elixir; in China, it's Xian Fan."

" 'The Elixir' doesn't that refer to a supposed cure-all/immortality potion sought after by alchemists?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow slightly. Did that mean there were Rasetsu in other parts of the world as well? Could that be where the European legends for vampires came from? Alchemists who had failed to create a proper Elixir and turned themselves into Rasetsus?

"You know of it?" Kondo asked, surprised.

"Well, I've heard of it. I read a lot." Sumiko replied, sweat-dropping. "But the Ochimizu is different from anything I've read about. Taking it greatly increases your strength, and wounds become very quick to heal. But it brings with it so much suffering that you can lose yourself."

"You've learned that much?" Matsumoto asked.

"Yes." Sumiko replied solemnly. "Which is why I can't believe Koudou-sensei would have had anything to do with it."

"Why? Why would my father research that?" Chizuru asked, clenching her fists. That terrible medicine!

"Regardless of Koudou-san's own feelings, he had to obey the Bakufu's orders." Matsumoto explained. "But as a result, Koudou-san left here. I believe it was his conscience that led him to that decision." He smiled kindly at the worried girls. "Please, have faith. Your father and Sensei is a man worthy of respect." He reassured them.

"Yes." Sumiko agreed. That must have been it. Chizuru raised her head and smiled slightly.

"Hai." She said.

"Incidentally, Sensei!" Kondo said after a moment, glancing at Matsumoto. "There's something I wish to tell you."

"Ah, sorry, Kondo-san. But before that, I have a favor to ask Matsumoto-sensei while he's here." Sumiko, smiling apologetically. "Sensei, could you please examine me? I think I may be coming down with something."

"Eh?" Chizuru said surprised. Sumiko never got sick!

"D-Don't tell me even Miyagawa-kun was affected by the 'exhibition of illness'!?" Kondo asked, startled.

"The what?" Sumiko asked, sweat-dropping.

"^"

"So, what is it you wanted to talk about?" Matsumoto asked once they

were alone in her room. "I can tell just from looking at you that you're as healthy as ever."

"Yeah. Thanks for going along with it." Sumiko said, smiling wryly. "Actually, it's about this." She said, walking over to the desk and pulling out a folded up piece of paper and five small packets of powdered medicine to give to him. "I've been working on something to help counteract the 'Rasetsus' thirst for blood."

"They've got you working on the Ochimizu, too!\_?" Matsumoto asked, alarmed.

"No! No way!" She responded quickly. "I don't want anything to do with something like that; I have zero interest in playing god. However, one of the guys who took it is a patient I was unable to save, so I wanted to try to do something to help him outâ€| but I wasn't sure how to tell Kondo-san and the others about it. If they knew I was looking into this and thought I was poking my nose where it didn't belong, they might become suspicious of me. So, it's really convenient you already know. It seems like you're in a better position than I am to offer this to them. I'd appreciate it if you told them it came from you."

"What is it?" Matsumoto asked as he opened up the folded piece of paper. It looked like notes and instructions for some kind of new medicine.

"It's basically just a powdered medicine made with the same concentration of iron and other nutrients found in blood." Sumiko replied. "My theory is that since the medicine works to enhance healing and muscle performance, which both use blood, perhaps the Rasetsu's blood thirst is simply their body's way of telling them they aren't making enough of their own for that. You know, like how sometimes people crave certain foods because their body instinctively know there's something in them that it needs, like sodium or magnesium? I don't know if it will work or not since it's just an imitation of the real thing, but I figured it was worth a try."

"Yes, I see what you mean." Matsumoto said thoughtfully. "It's a good theory. All right, Miyagawa-kun. I'll see that they get this medicine, but you should be careful not to stick your neck out anymore than you already have."

"Haha. No worries there, Matsumoto-sensei." She said, smiling wryly. "I like my neck right where it is, still attached to my head."

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"San'nan-kun? You're alive?" Matsumoto said, surprised when Kondo showed him to his next patient once he had finished with Sumiko. Was he the patient she had been talking about?

"Yes. May apologies for the worry I've caused, but I've been here, continuing research on the medicine." San'nan explained calmly.

"Meaning, you've succeeded?" Matsumoto asked.

"As you can see. I am proof of such." San'nan replied.

"But given that you can't be out in public, it's not a \_complete\_ success." Matsumoto said.

"But if I continue to refine it, it may become workable." San'nan said.

"You're better off not trying." Matsumoto said sternly. "It's too dangerous."

"But, researching the medicine is at the order of the Bakufu." Kondo said.

"That may be so, butâ€¦" Matsumoto said, frowning. He sighed heavily. He could tell from the look on San'nan's face that nothing he said was going to make any difference. If only more people shared Sumiko's attitude toward playing godâ€¦

## 24. The Fetters of Fate

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 24: The Fetters of Fate<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Chizuru and Sumiko were hanging some freshly laundered kimonos up to dry.<p>

"I'll go get the rest." Sumiko said, heading back to the well, where they'd left the ones that needed to soak a little longer.

"Okay." Chizuru said, wiping her brow. She turned when something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye and saw that Okita was walking with Matsumoto-sensei. Curious, she decided to follow them.

"You have no appetite, a slight fever, and sweat profusely at nightâ€¦" Matsumoto said thoughtfully, repeating the symptoms Okita had just told him he was suffering from.

"Yes." Okita replied. He figured he might as well ask Matsumoto-sensei while he was here before Sumiko carried through with her threat to Hijikata. That woman was just crazy enough to do it. Matsumoto was silent for a moment, and then he sighed heavily.

"Here's what I think: your illness is tuberculosis." The doctor informed him frankly. There was no point in sugar-coating such a fatal diagnosis.

"Tuberculosis!" Chizuru gasped softly from where she was hiding around the corner, horrified.

"Oh, jeez. That famous deadly illness, huh?" Okita said rather calmly.

"You're not surprised?" Matsumoto asked.

"To be honest, I'd already heard as much from Sumiko-san. She insisted I get a second opinion since she wasn't entirely sure. But being told for certain like this to my face, yeah, it sucks." He said, laughing, while he rubbed the back of his neck.

"This is nothing to laugh about!" Matsumoto said sternly. "You should leave the Shinsengumi at once and begin recovery! You need to rest at a place with fresh air!"

"Leave the Shinsengumi?" Okita asked, turning back to face him. "I can't do that."

"!" Matsumoto gasped in astonishment. If he had already talked to Sumiko about this, then surely she would have told him the danger his life was in!

"Whether my life is long or short, there are few things I can do." Okita continued resolutely. "To stand with the Shinsengumi and kill our enemies! That's about it. All the more so if I have little time left. Being here is everything to me." Even though she had threatened to rat him out, Sumiko had never even broached the subject of him possibly leaving the Shinsengumi. Perhaps, because she understood this. Maybe already knew what he would say if she did. She was sharp like that.

"But!" Matsumoto began to protest, but he fell silent after seeing the solid determination in the eyes of the young man before him. "I accept your resolve." He eventually conceded. "All the more reason that you should do as I say going forward. Don't push yourself too hard."

"Hai." Okita said solemnly. So, in the end, it was pretty much the same as what Sumiko had already told him. "Oh, and please don't tell Kondo-san and the others. I'd also appreciate it if you could let Sumiko-san know we talked, since she was threatening to tell if I didn't see another doctor soon. Promise me, okay?" He asked with a sly smile.

Matsumoto nodded and went to find Sumiko. Okita sat down and waited for him to disappear before calling out to his little eavesdropper.

"Chizuru-chan."

"!" Chizuru gasped, startled to have been so easily discovered.

"Come on out, it's okay." He said. She stepped out from around the corner, peering cautiously at him. "Yes, come over here." He told her, patting the spot next to him. Chizuru quietly walked over and sat down beside him. "Are you taking that talk just now to heart?" He asked, smiling slightly, when he noticed how upset she was on his behalf. "You wouldn't tell anyone this silly story, would you?" He asked, trying to laugh it off. Chizuru was silent. "Sumiko-san already knows, but if you plan on telling anyone else, well then! I'd have to kill you."

"Okita-san. You always say that." Chizuru replied somberly. Okita smiled slightly.

"Yeah, maybe so." He stood up and started to walk away.

"Okita-san." Chizuru said as she also stood, stopping him. "I'll keep quiet about your illness. I promise I won't tell anyone."

"Thank you."

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Sumiko and Chizuru were both lost deep in thought while they swept the courtyard by the pond together, pondering the heavy secret they had to carry now that Sumiko's unwelcome diagnosis had been confirmed. Well, Okita didn't have to worry about either of them talking. After hearing what had happened from Matsumoto-sensei, she had decided to just let him do as he wished with what was left of his life since there was nothing else she could do for him. She would just have to keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't push himself too hard and rush to his graveâ€|

"They've made you do grunt work, is that it?" An all too familiar voice asked suddenly from behind as a gentle breeze sent ripples across the surface of the pond.

"!" Both girls gasped in alarm as they spun around to face the owner. Kazama was resting on the large boulder in the center of the pond.

"You, with the blood of Oni in you, doing the humans' biddingâ€|"

Sumiko furrowed her brow, silently berating herself for letting her guard down so far.

"Chizuru, run." Sumiko urged her friend, tightening her grip on her broom. Of all the times for them \_not\_ to be wearing their swordsâ€|!

"Wh-What are you doing here?" Chizuru demanded nervously, staying where she was. Sumiko sweat-dropped as she glanced at her friend, slightly chagrined. Why couldn't she ever just listen, for once?

"Hmph. This has gone beyond laughable into just plain pitiful." Kazama said assumingly as he stared down at them. Both girls furrowed their brows and narrowed their eyes at him.

"For your information, everyone takes turns doing this." Sumiko retorted tartly. "It's called 'shared responsibility'."

"Don't get so angry." Kazama told the girls, standing up. "I'm not here to fight today."

"Hearing that almost makes me afraid to ask: what \_are\_ you here for?" Sumiko asked.

"You two have some relationship with Koudou?" Kazama asked, getting straight to the point.



'He knows my father?' Chizuru thought as Sumiko's pokerface instantly slid into place.

'We should probably play this cool until we find out what he wants and how much he knowsâ€|' Sumiko thought.

"Why do youâ€?" She started ask carefully, when Chizuru abruptly blurted out:

"Yukimura Koudou is my father! Sumiko-san is his apprentice!"

'Chizuruâ€|!' Sumiko cried internally as she hung her head in defeat. 'Why are you telling everything to someone who wants to kidnap you!\_?'

"Eh?" Chizuru said, glancing at her friend. Did she do something wrong? Kazama tilted his head slightly, looking a bit surprised himself to hear such a candid answer. He smirked slightly.

"I get it." He said. Sumiko raised her head upon catching that.

"Get what?" She asked, furrowing her brow. "You allâ€| What do you want withâ€?"

"Came sneaking alone into enemy territory, did you?" Hijikata asked, stepping out from behind a nearby tree. "Sorry, but I can't overlook such foolishness." Sumiko-sweat dropped. How long had he been standing there? She must have been really out of it not to notice soonerâ€|

The two men exchanged a sharp look.

"What are you doin' here in the middle of the day?" Sano asked as he arrived on the scene, aiming his spear at Kazama. "It's still too early to try chatting up a woman."

"You better stay away from them!" Heisuke added as he ran up, placing himself in front of Chizuru and Sumiko.

"Everyoneâ€|" Chizuru said, relieved. Sumiko kept her grip firm on the handle of her broom.

"How you roam in a pack is just like dogs. Isn't it?" Kazama commented haughtily.

"Now you've done it." Hijikata said, looking pissed, as he pushed his sword out of its sheath slightly with his thumb, preparing the draw.

"If you want me to play with you, I can be your opponent, but unfortunately I've come here on business today." Kazama stated calmly, unfazed. "Also, let me give you a warning: stop turning mere humans into oni."

Chizuru gasped as Sumiko's eyes widened slightly in surprise and realization.

'Turning humans into oni? Is he talking about the Rasetsu?' Sumiko

thought. 'He knows about them?'

"Mind your damn business." Hijikata retorted sharply.

"Yeah, some sleazebag who'd try to abduct a woman in broad daylight has no business talkin'." Sano added.

"Heheh. Fools." Kazama said smugly, laughing quietly to himself. "I gave you this warning trying to show you mercy."

"This is our territory!" Heisuke said. "Quit talkin' big and get the hell outta here already!"

"Hmph!" Kazama laughed. "The weakest dog does tend to bark. Chizuru, we have Koudou on our side. You know what that means, yes?" He asked as she gasped and Sumiko furrowed her brow. "It means the man who is your father and her teacher has abandoned the Bakufu."

"I don't believe you. Like we'd take the word of someone who tried to kidnap us." Sumiko said defiantly. Kazama smirked, as if he had expected such a reaction from her.

"Tell me, then. What does it take to gain the trust of a girl who is out of time and place?" He asked loftily.

"!?" Sumiko gasped as her eyes widened and her pupils constricted. 'No\_â€| it couldn't beâ€| The only person she had ever told about that was Koudou-san. Even Chizuru didn't know.

"Sumiko-sanâ€|?" Chizuru asked, concerned when she saw the stunned and betrayed look on her friend's face.

"Was that a threat, you bastard!?" Heisuke demanded hotly.

"For what reason are you here?" Kazama asked the girls calmly, ignoring Heisuke's outburst. "You should think about that." With a gust of wind, the oni vanished.

'My father is with themâ€|?' Chizuru thought as she bowed her head sadly, shaken by the look she had seen on her friend's face. 'He's with the anti-foreigner faction?' She didn't understand what Kazama had said that upset her so much, but she could tell Sumiko knew something.

'I could maybe understand Koudou-san being tempted to turn on the Bakufu after they made him make the Ochimizu, but to team up with the same creeps who were trying to kidnap Chizuruâ€| and then to tell them thatâ€| What is he thinking!?' Sumiko wondered, clenching her fists as she trembled slightly. What did this mean? What would happen now that someone else knew she was from the future? Did they really believe that, or had Kazama just said it to get her goat because he knew that she did? She hoped it was the second case, because it could spell big trouble if someone out there wanted to try to use her as a cheat-sheet for the futureâ€|

"Don't make that face, Chizuru, Sumiko." Heisuke said, trying to cheer the girls up. "Don't go believin' anything he'd say!"

"Yeah. There's no guarantee that what he's saying is true." Sano said.

"We have inspectors out there looking for Koudou-san as well."  
Hijikata added. "We're sure to pick up something."

"Yes." Chizuru said, raising her head, as she forced herself to think positively. Sumiko put on a brave face and smiled for them to hide the doubt she still felt.

~~~~~

Kazama Chikage was standing on a bridge, leaning back against the railing, while he watched the sun set. His visit with the female oni and half-oni had gone as expected for the most part, but what he hadn't expected was to get such a strong reaction out of Miyagawa Sumiko for hinting that she might be from the future, as Koudou had claimed. He didn't believe such a thing was truly possible, but her reaction had been far too honest and unrehearsed. At the very least, she herself honestly believed it to be true, and Koudou had said he saw her appear in a ball of bright light in the middle of previously dark and empty street three years ago. It was unthinkable. But if it were true, then why was she with the Shinsengumi? Was it merely coincidence, or did she know something they didn't? He wondered if she was helping them continue their research on the Ochimizu. Koudou had said such a thing would never happen, but she was his apprentice. And she was half human. Who knew what kind of foolishness she was capable of?

"What business did you have with them?" Amagiri asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Hm?" Kazama said, glancing over his shoulder to see that the older oni was standing down below on the bank of the river. "I went to confirm those girls' relationship to Koudou."

"Is that really the only reason?" Amagiri asked.

"What do you want to say?" Kazama asked sharply, furrowing his brow.

"I'm asking if perhaps you have an interest in those humans."

"Not interest; nothing more than pity." Kazama replied more calmly, glancing back at the sunset.

"There is no need to further involve ourselves with humans." Amagiri said as Kazama straightened up and started to walk away. "We need only repay our obligation to Satsuma."

~~~~~

Back at the Shinsengumi headquarters, Kondo was having an evening meeting with San'nan. On the paper San'nan had just passed to his commander were the kanji for 'Rasetsu' and 'Unit'.

"I've dubbed it the 'Rasetsu Unit'. Please use us, for the sake of strengthening the group." San'nan told him.

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

## ><p><strong>Chapter 25: Dangos Over Flowers<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"Hm?" Sumiko said, puzzled when she couldn't find Chizuru anywhere. She had been doing some follow-up checkups on the men Matsumoto-sensei had diagnosed with various illnesses while Chizuru did some sweeping.<p>

"Something wrong?" Shinpachi asked when she saw her looking around.

"Oh, Shinpachi-san. You and Sano-san are back from patrol already?" She asked as he headed over to her. "I was just looking for Chizuru, but I can't seem to find herâ€|"

"Oh, Chizuru?" He said. "Don't worry, Sano took her out to have dangos with this girl called 'Sen'. She's been looking pretty down lately, so he thought talking to another girl for a little while might cheer her up."

"\_I'm \_another girl." Sumiko reminded him, chagrined. "But yeah, I get what you mean. I heard about Osen-chan from Chizuru the other day. It'll be good for her to be able to talk and laugh with someone her own age without having to worry about anything for awhile."

"Speaking of which, you seemed to be pretty worried about something yourselfâ€|" Shinpachi commented. "Wanna talk about it over some sake?"

"I'm just worried about Koudou-san and Chizuru. There isn't really anything new to talk about thereâ€| but I won't say no to some sake." She replied with a wry smile.

"Heh. See, if you were a girl, you'd have at least said something about it being 'too early'." Shinpachi teased.

"Shinpachi-san. You like to live dangerously, don't you?" Sumiko asked, raising her fist.

"Ah! I'm against domestic violence!" He cried, shielding himself.

"What are you two doing?" Hijikata asked sternly. They had better not be slacking off again.

"Nothing. I was just about to beat some sense into Shinpachi-san. That's all." Sumiko replied innocently.

"â€| Carry on." Hijikata said, walking away.

"Eh!\_?" Shinpachi exclaimed incredulously. Did he seriously just give her his blessing to beat the crap out of him? Did Hijikata have any idea what sort of hell he had just unleashed? This wasn't going to be like getting hit by a normal womanâ€|! He glanced cautiously

back at Sumiko, who was a rather ominous smirk on her face. "Ah, hold onâ€¦ wait a minute, Sumiko-sanâ€¦" I mean, Sumiko-\_sama\_â€¦" I'm sure we can come to some sort of arrangementâ€¦"

"I want some inarizushi to go with the sake." She stated boldly. "You have ten minutes."

"She's been hanging out with Okita too muchâ€¦" Shinpachi mumbled to himself as he turned and made a run for the kitchen. There was no way he'd finish her request in that shot amount of time! And to begin with, how did you even make that dish? All he knew was that there was fried tofu added in at some pointâ€¦

Sumiko smiled slightly as she watched him scurry away in a panic, and let out a laugh, but her expression became more solemn again as she raised her face to look up at the blue summer sky.

'Well, I guess I should try not to think about it or let it bother me so much.' She thought. 'After all, worrying is like praying for stuff you don't want to happenâ€¦'

â€œ"âˆžâ€œ"

"Chizuru-chan, eat up." Sen said cheerfully when they served their tea and dango. "The dango here is quite delicious." Chizuru smiled and picked one up to try.

"You're right. It's delicious!" Chizuru said.

"Right? I'm glad." Sen said, smiling brightly. "I've been thinking about you since then."

"Eh?"

"It must be rough, being a woman in a male troop, I thought." Sen said as they both glanced at Sano, who was acting as Chizuru's chaperone and waiting nearby in the shade of another building, a discrete distance away. "It didn't feel like the first time I'd met you, I couldn't just leave you be. Still, I guess I'm just being nosy." She added with a wink.

"Thank you." Chizuru said, smiling happily. "But it's all right. I have Sumiko-san with me. For me she's like a dependable big sister, but she's so cool and strong that a lot of the men actually call her 'Aniki'."

"Haha! I'd like to meet this Sumiko-san." Sen said, smiling and laughing good-naturedly. She sounded like a real card. Chizuru smiled. She had a feeling Osen-chan and Sumiko-san would get along well.

"Oh, but Osen-chan, how could you know right off the bat that I was a girl?" Chizuru asked.

"Of course I could." Sen said. "We're both girls."

"Oh, yeahâ€¦" Chizuru said.

"Chizuru-chan, where were you born?" Sen asked.

"Um, Edo."

"Huh. Any siblings?"

"No."

"An only child, huh? The same as me." Sen said, smiling as she took a bite of her dango.

'Come to think of it, it's been a while since I've talked to a girl other than Sumiko-san like this.' Chizuru thought with a small smile.

"People don't speak well of the Shinsengumi in Kyoto, but some of them are good people." Sen said, glancing at Sano again. "He told me, 'She's been down recently, so have a lively talk with her, make her feel better.' "

"Eh? Harada-san did?" Chizuru asked, surprised.

"Ah! I promised to keep it a secret!" Sen said, making a silly but cute face at herself for the slipup. "Well, I'll be going now." She said, standing up.

"Thank you, Osen-chan." Chizuru said, following suit. "It was a lot of fun."

"For me too." Sen said, smiling. "Next time, let's go somewhere that has delicious manju. You bring Sumiko-san with you, too, if you'd like."

"Okay!" Chizuru said, smiling.

"And you as well, sir." Sen said, turning to face Sano. "See you!" She bowed goodbye and walked away.

The sun was setting now as Chizuru and Sano made their way back to headquarters.

"Um, Harada-san! Thank you very much." Chizuru said as they walked. "Um, have I been that gloomy?" She asked, blushing slightly out of embarrassment.

"Huh? Oh, jeez. That girl told you, huh?" He asked, smiling wryly. Looks like he got caught after all.

"Sorry." Chizuru said.

"Not at all. But good thing, huh? You look happy that you got to eat some dango." He said brightly.

"Huh!\_?" Chizuru said. "No, that's not!" Sano smiled as he patted her on the head.

"Well, 'Good fortune comes to those who smile,' right?" He said with a wink.

"Hai!" Chizuru said, smiling brightly.

"~"

The next morning, both girls were bright-eyed and busy-tailed.

"Here." Chizuru said cheerfully, handing Inoue-san a full rice bowl. He, Hijikata, and Saito were already present and eating. They were just waiting on the late risers now.

"Thank you." Inoue said, smiling.

"I'm sleepy! Fooood!" Shinpachi said sleepily while Sano yawned as they came in to join them.

"Good morning!" Sumiko greeted them brightly as she and Chizuru smiled.

"Yeah." Both men said, a little surprised by the sudden transformation. They glanced at each other and smiled, silently congratulating the other on a job well done.

"Where's Heisuke?" Hijikata asked. He already knew where Okita was.

"Ain't he still asleep?" Shinpachi said with a smirk.

"Yukimura-kun, I'm sorry, but could you go wake Heisuke?" Inoue asked.

"No way, let Sumiko-san do it." Shinpachi said with a grin.

"Yeah. Show no mercy." Sano said, smiling wryly.

"No mercyâ€¦ just what kind of image do you guys have of me?" Sumiko asked, smiling wryly as she got up and left to wake the sleepy Heisuke.

â€œâ^žâ€œ"

Later on, the two girls smiled and laughed, racing each other while they wiped the porch floors. Sumiko won three out of five times, but Chizuru won the winner-takes-all match.

"All right, that'll do it." Chizuru said, smiling cheerfully, as they stopped to wipe the sweat from their brows now that the floorboards were sparkling clean.

"Finished?" Okita asked.

"Eh!\_?" Chizuru gasped, startled, when they both looked over and saw that Okita was sitting on the porch steps with his wet hair down and the front of his kimono open. "Okita-san, what are you doing out dressed like that?"

"I got sweaty while I was sleeping. I took a quick bath and have been drying in the sun." He explained.

"You need to be more careful. No matter how good the weather is, with your hair wet like that, you're going to catch a cold!" Sumiko scolded him sternly, furrowing her brow.

"You look just like Hijikata-san when you glare like that." Okita said, laughing. Sumiko frowned, unamused. For just how long was he going to keep teasing her about her crush?

"It's all right at all." Chizuru said. "Please take better care of yourself."

"You're unexpectedly nagging, with a weird sense of worry." Okita commented, glancing at Chizuru. It was one thing coming from Sumiko; she was a doctor, so was like an occupational hazard. "You're like Hijikata-san, too." He said as he started to tie up his hair.

"Eh?" Chizuru said, blushing. Sumiko sighed when she saw the look on her friend's face, but she quickly getting up and smacked Okita's hand out of his hair.

"I told you, you have to properly dry yourself first!" She scolded him, grabbing the towel he had slung over his shoulders so she could use it dry his wet hair better.

"Th-That's right!" Chizuru said, backing Sumiko up, as she recovered from her blush.

"Sumiko-san! Why do you have to be so forceful?" Okita asked, chagrined, as she continued rubbing his hair roughly with the towel.

"Just because." She huffed moodily, frowning. She recognized the look she had seen on Chizuru's face. It was the look of a girl in love. She sighed. Why did they have to have the same taste in men?

Okita noticed the look on her face out the corner of his eye and glanced at Chizuru.

"Hnh. You can stop. That's dry enough." He said, standing up. It looked like they both sucked when it came to picking who to fall in love with. He pulled his hair back and tied it up in his usual hairstyle. "There's something I want to ask you."

"Huh?" Chizuru said. Why did he suddenly look so serious?

"Truthfully, what do you think of my hair?" The two girls blinked and exchanged a glance, but then they smiled.

"It suits you." Sumiko said with a wry smile.

"Yeah." Chizuru agreed.

"Oh, yeah? I'm glad. Thank you." Okita said, smiling happily. He knew Sumiko wouldn't have sugar-coated her opinion for him, so it must be true. "The truth is, I was trying to copy Kondo-san with this." He admitted.

"I was kind of wondering, I thought the two styles were kind of similar." Sumiko said.

"True enough, the style is the same." Chizuru agreed, smiling.



"You can't tell anyone else." Okita told them, holding a finger to his lips.

"Hai." They said, smiling. It was nice to have made a promise with him that didn't end with 'or I'll kill you.'

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Later that evening, Sumiko and Chizuru were taking a walk around the grounds, and happened to overhear Hijikata scolding someone as they drew near the front gate.

"You've come back awfully late for not having been on patrol." Hijikata told Shinpachi, Heisuke, and Sano, who were all pink in the face from drinking. "I believe I told you long ago that breaking curfew is cause for seppuku."

"I was the one who forced 'em to go." Shinpachi said, crossing his arms. "They're not responsible at all. Tell me to do seppuku, and I'll do it!"

"!" Heisuke and Sano gasped, startled.

"Shinpachi, you're not the one to decide that." Hijikata said sternly. "Regardless of who made whom go, the fact is all of you broke the squad's rules."

"Please wait, Hijikata-san." Sano said.

"The two of us were bad, too." Heisuke said. "If we'd said 'let's go' sooner~"

"You fools go to your rooms." Hijikata commanded the two of them. "I'll give further instructions later." He then turned and led Shinpachi away to confront him first.

"S-Sano-san! Is this okay?" Heisuke asked anxiously.

"Let's go!" Sano said, grabbing him by the wrist, so he could pull him along. "Chizuru, Sumiko, you two come, too."

"Right behind you!" Sumiko said as they followed the boys.

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"Well, what'll it be?" Shinpachi asked impatiently once he was seated facing Hijikata. "I've come too far to be afraid of death now. If you're gonna say it, just go and say it." Hijikata sighed.

"You're unhappy with how I've done things, yes? This is how you've always acted in times like that." He said calmly.

Shinpachi was a bit taken aback to have been seen through so easily, but while they were on the subject~

"It's like~ recently, you've been kind to the new members, but way too hard on us guys who've been around the longest, haven't ya? Sure, we're not clever talkers and don't have friends in high places. But the Shinsengumi only got this big because we fought, ready to die

for it, right!\_? Shinpachi said heatedly. A bead of nervous sweat rolled down the side of his face when Hijikata closed his eyes and there was a long, heavy moment of silence in the room.

"I'm sorry." Hijikata said.

"Ah." Shinpachi said, surprised. Hijikata opened his eyes and raised his head.

"There are those who've said I've treated you all too fondly. That I only give the veterans important posts, that I favor them, give them special pay. Garbage like that. However, it was wrong of me to go so far, nagging you about this and that." Hijikata said with a small smile towards the end.

"Jeez. I swear, I'm no match for you." Shinpachi said, smiling wryly. He bowed to Hijikata. "I'm sorry, too. Let's go drinkin' again soon." He suggested on a happier note now that they had made up. "I'll find some weak sake that even \_you\_ can handle can drink, Hijikata-san."

"Hmph. You've got it all wrong." Hijikata said, smiling. "It's not that I can't drink; I just that I \_don't\_ drink."

Shinpachi smirked. Yeah, sure.

The four who had been listening anxiously outside the door all shared smiles of relief.

â€"â^žâ€"

\*\*July, 1866\*\*

"Th-The Shogunâ€|!" Shinpachi gasped as he sprinted back to headquarters with some startling news.

"Lord Iemochi is dead!\_?" Hijikata exclaimed when they all heard the news, furrowing his brow with concern. Sumiko closed her eyes and looked away. It was startingâ€|

Shortly thereafter, the conquest of Choshu, which had begun with the Kinmon Rebellion, brought about the shocking conclusion that was the Bakufu Army's great defeat. It was the instant that great tree which stood unshaken for 260 years had begun to creak.

## 26. Fleeting Dreams

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 26: Fleeting Dreams<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>September, 1866<strong>

A notice board at the Sanjo Bridge proclaiming 'the Choshu Domain is the enemy' was pulled up, and the Shinsengumi were ordered to protect

the boards.

"Oh, welcome back." Chizuru greeted Shinpachi when he came over to join her, Sumiko, and Sano in the shade and sit on the steps after having just returned from guarding the notice boards.

"Yeah. How'd it go?" Sano asked. Shinpachi responded with a huge yawn.

"I'm so tired, I can't stand it." He said. "I don't mind crossin' swords with those Choshu guys, butâ€¦ I just can't get worked up about protectin' a notice board."

"Well, in that case, don't think about it like that." Sumiko said. "Try thinking of it as waiting for a duel while you just happened to be by the notice boards, rather than making it all about the notice boards."

"Oh, I like that. Positive thinking, huh?" Shinpachi said, grinning. Chizuru smiled wryly.

"Now that the entire Bakufu army has lost to the Choshu Domain," Itou said, causing them to glance up and see that he was standing on the porch just a few feet away, "I don't think having killed some rogue samurai will change anything."

"Itou-san, you have a complaint with the duties of the Shinsengumi?" Sano asked challengingly.

"Heavens, no." Itou said. "Protecting a signboard is an important duty in and of itself. Well, please do your best." He said a bit too patronizingly for their taste as he turned and walked away.

"Damn. He's a creepy dude, as always." Shinpachi grumbled in annoyance.

"Freakin' okama." Sumiko muttered under her breath.

"I often see him getting and his pals together, whispering about this and that. Who knows what he's up to behind the scenes." Sano said, furrowing his brow. "Just what was Kondo-san thinking when he recruited a guy like that?"

"Harada-san." One of the men in Sano's group said, getting their attention.

"Oh. Time's up, huh?" Sano said when he saw his patrol group waiting for him.

"Good luck." Sumiko called after him as they left to start their watch.

"Please take care, Harada-san." Chizuru said.

"Yeah." He said, glancing back at them with a smile.

â€œâ^žâ€œ

"Eyah! Sano, you've really done us a service!" Shinpachi said

excitedly as he and all their fellow captains, Sumiko, Chizuru, and even Hijikata passed through the gate of Shimabara together the next night. The previous evening, Sano's group had successfully protected the sign boards and even caught a few of the would-be vandals. "I never thought you'd use the reward money to treat us all."

'Wow, so this is what the famous Shimabara looks like on the insideâ€|' Sumiko thought as she glanced around. She had tried visiting before in modern times out of curiosity, but it was about as different as night and day. For one thing, they actually had a retirement home in the future where dance hall was now.

"Shinpachi-san, if you want to praise him, you should mention that he protected the sign board." Okita said.

"Yeah, of course. Oh!" Shinpachi said when he spotted their favorite place, rushing ahead. "Well, Sano's paying for tonight!" He paused outside the teahouse's entrance and gestured for the others to head inside. "Drink all you like, and sweep the gloom of the day away!" He said generously.

"Bastard, this is my money." Sano reminded his loudmouthed friend, sweat-dropping, as he passed him by and entered into the building first.

"Sano-san, thank you!" Heisuke yelled cheerfully as he followed their benefactor for the evening inside. "I'll be sure to drink my fill!"

"It's not like all of us can drink sake, though." Okita commented as he entered next, referring to a certain someone, who was right behind him.

"Enough of that talk." Hijikata said firmly, furrowing his brow. "Eat whatever food you want."

"Yeah! Yeah!" Shinpachi said gleefully as he followed the demon vice-commander inside.

"Are you okay, Chizuru?" Sumiko asked, noting how the younger girl was hesitating. She and Saito had waited to make sure she would be all right with following them in. It wasn't like they were headed into a house for prostitutes, but Chizuru was still really innocent when it came to these sorts of things.

"Hai." Chizuru said as she stared up at the building.

"You're both one of us now, so don't hold back on ceremony." Saito told them before starting to head inside. That seemed to be what Chizuru had needed to hear.

"Uh, okay." Chizuru said as she hurried after him. Sumiko smiled wryly and followed them in. This should be interestingâ€|

They were all led into a large, beautiful, and richly decorated room. The men seemed used to it, but both Chizuru and Sumiko were glancing all around, admiring the flashy dÃ©cor.

"It's like sitting inside a giant jewelry boxâ€|" Sumiko commented as

she stared up at the gold leafed ceiling with a colorful fan pattern. The screen door with large pink and red peonies painted on it slid open, revealing a bowing geisha.

"Greetings to you all." The beautifully dressed woman politely greeted her guests. "I shall be accompanying you gentlemen this evening." She raised her head looking up at them with an artfully painted face that highlighted her elegant and feminine features. "My name is Kimigiku. I hope you have a pleasant time."

"So pretty!" Chizuru breathed out loud, blushing slightly, as she echoed Sumiko's own thoughts. Kimigiku smiled warmly at Chizuru for the compliment. Sumiko smiled as she watched Chizuru shyly bow her head in acknowledgement to the geisha, somewhat amused that it was one of the girls in their group who seemed to be hitting it off with their pretty hostess the most.

In no time at all, Kimigiku-san had made sure they had more than enough food and sake to go around for everyone.

"This high-end sake sure is great!" Heisuke cheered enthusiastically, raising his container with one hand while he held his cup in the other. "It's the throat like, \_bam. Bam!"\_

"Heisuke. You've only been drinking, and not eating." Shinpachi said after taking a sip from his own cup. "You'll get drunk." He teased.

"It's fine for today!" Heisuke retorted.

"You're both red in the face already anyway." Sumiko commented, smiling, as she sipped her sake, enjoying the smooth taste. Though, she was still a bit miffed that Kimigiku-san had sidled up to Hijikata-san to flirt with him. Well, not that she could really blame the other woman for making a beeline for the most attractive man in the room, but still! Sharing him with Chizuru was one thing, and having to share him with a stranger was another thing entirely.

"Chizuru! You ain't drinkin', huh?" Shinpachi asked when he noticed all she had was tea. "How you gonna get drunk!?"

"Um, I can't drink, so!" Chizuru said, smiling wryly.

"I see. Then eat till you're stuffed!" He encouraged her, smirking as he knocked back another cup of sake.

"I've heard you're like a demon, Hijikata-san of the Shinsengumi, but it would seem an act, as you're such a good man." Kimigiku said as she continued to sit beside the vice-commander.

"I hear that often." Hijikata replied with a straight face as he took another sip of sake.

"Pfffffft!" Heisuke and Shinpachi had to turn their heads as they spat their sake out, so they wouldn't spray the others sitting across from them. Sumiko managed to hold onto her mouthful, but she couldn't help but join them in laughing. That had just been too priceless! Like comedy gold.

"Hijikata-san's already drunk, huh?" Shinpachi said, cracking up.

"That was fast!" Heisuke laughed. "He never could hold his liquor."

"He can't hold it in!"

Okita smirked while he and Saito quietly sipped from their own cups. Chizuru smiled at the merriment going on about her and glanced over at Hijikata and Kimigiku. It was like an entirely different atmosphere over there as she watched the elegant Kimigiku pour more sake into Hijikata's cup.

'I wonder if that's the 'beautiful man, beautiful woman' ideal. It's like something from a painting.' Chizuru sighed heavily as she looked away, feeling incredibly defeated. Okita and Sumiko noticed this and glanced at her out the corner of their eyes. 'As a fellow girl, I feel lacking somehowâ€|'

'A-ah. I know how you feel, Chizuruâ€|' Sumiko thought, sighing, too. It was hard to keep up your confidence as a girl when you were sitting in the same room as beautiful geisha while disguised as a maleâ€| especially when men who were nearly twice your size kept calling you 'Aniki' all the timeâ€|'

"Still, if we can get this kind of money from protecting a sign board, who knows how much we can get if we catch all the culprits!" Shinpachi said.

"Yeah, you said it." Heisuke agreed.

"Hey, Sano. Why'd you let 'em go?" Shinpachi asked. "If there were eight of them, you should've been able to figure something out."

"Yeah. I thought that was weird, too." Heisuke said. "At least some of 'em got caught, right?" Sano bowed his head before looking up across the room, focusing his attention on a certain person.

"Chizuru. Did you go out that night?" He asked.

"Huh?" Chizuru asked as she and Sumiko both glanced up, wondering why he was suddenly asking such a thing. "No." She replied honestly.

"Truthfully?" He asked, furrowing his brow.

"Yes. I'm always at headquarters at night." Chizuru replied.

"That's right. And last night she was helping me bring some of my finished poems into a booklet." Sumiko said, furrowing her own brow slightly. What was with the third degree?

"Hey, what's up Sano?" Shinpachi asked.

"It's just, when we went up against the Tosa soldiers, someone who looked just like Chizuru was there." Sano said. Shinpachi and Hijikata were instantly alert upon hearing that. "And then, our

cordon fell apart." Okita glanced at Chizuru out the corner of his eye.

"It can't be!" Chizuru said quietly in disbelief.

"Of course not! I already said she was with me." Sumiko said, furrowing her brow, as she took another sip of sake.

"Hmm, but if you knew Chizuru were in trouble, you'd lie for her wouldn't you?" Sano said, not really meaning anything malicious by it. He didn't want Chizuru to be guilty either, but they all knew how loyal Sumiko was to her friend.

"But I'm not." Sumiko replied frostily, annoyed that they were even still debating this. "No matter what it looked like, it was obviously someone else."

"Hey, could it be the girl you, Chizuru, Heisuke, and I met out on patrol before?" Okita suggested.

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped as both girls suddenly remembered their encounter with Chizuru's doppelganger.

"That's right! Didn't she say her name was something like Nagumo Kaoru?" Sumiko said. Kimigiku raised her head slightly upon hearing the name.

"She really did look like you, huh?" Okita asked Chizuru.

"But that's not enough to—" Chizuru said, reluctant to point a finger at someone who might be just as innocent as she.

"I didn't really think so, but—" after all, the other one was dressed like a girl." Heisuke said.

"Then we should have her dress in a girl's kimono." Saito stated calmly.

"Huh?" Chizuru said as they all stared at her. "Heh? Heh!?"

"Chizuru in—" Heisuke said excitedly, jumping to his feet.

"Oh, yeah! That's a good idea!" Shinpachi said, grinning, as he also jumped up. "Hey, Kimigiku-san! Would you dress this one in a girl's kimono for us?" He asked, pointing at Chizuru.

"You all—" Hijikata started scold them as he moved to get up, but Kimigiku placed a hand on his chest to stop him.

"Very well, I shall do my utmost." She said, looking rather eager to do her part. Hijikata raised his head and furrowed his brow as he stared down at the geisha in surprise. Sumiko noted that the slight he flush in his face from the sake he drank deepened slightly, indicating that he was actually blushing at the thought of seeing Chizuru dressed as a girl. She sighed heavily and hung her head in defeat. She doubted he would have reacted that way if they had made the same suggestion about her.

"~"

"I can't wait to see what she'll look like!" Shimpachi said as they all continued to eat and drink while waiting. Hijikata had retreated to the balcony for some fresh air.

"Chizuru would be even prettier than Nagumo-san if she wore girl's clothing." Sumiko stated matter-of-factly.

"Eh!\_? Really!\_?" Heisuke asked excitedly.

"What's the matter, Sumiko-san? Did you want to dress up, too?" Okita asked slyly, noting that she seemed a little upset about something. She'd been leaning pretty heavily on the sake ever since Chizuru had left to be dressed by Kimigiku. He was amazed she wasn't drunk yet. She had only just started to get a light flush in her cheeks.

"I wouldn't mind." Sumiko admitted, surprising them.

"Really?" Sano asked.

"I actually like pretty kimonos, makeup, and that sort of girly stuff, but I don't think they really suit me!" She said a little regretfully, taking another sip of sake. "After all, people hardly ever see through my disguise, and I'm just a rough guy people like to call 'Aniki'!" Silence fell over the room as they all stared at her, not sure how to react to such a surprising revelation.

"O-Oi, I'm not really sure, but I get the feeling we've been unknowingly doing something pretty bad to her!" Shimpachi whispered to Sano, sweat-dropping.

"You're the one always going on about how she isn't a 'real girl'!" Sano whispered back, sweat-dropping.

"Everyone. My apologies for the wait." Kimigiku said through the screen door, making sure they were all paying attention, before sliding them open for Chizuru to enter. Even though all she did was change her hairstyle and clothing and put on a little makeup, the transformation was amazing. All of the men stared at her, stunned. Even Okita, for a moment. Sumiko had been right. Chizuru was \_a lot\_ prettier than Nagumo Kaoru.

'That's my girl!' Sumiko thought, winking, as she gave her friend a thumbs up. Chizuru blushed shyly.

"H-Huh? That you Chizuru!\_?" Heisuke asked.

"Y-Yes." Chizuru replied shyly, blushing even more.

"Well. Talk about a change. For a second, I didn't know who it was." Okita said.

"Well? What do you think, Sano?" Saito asked calmly.

"Hm? Nn!" Sano said thoughtfully as the pink flush in his face deepened slightly. "Well, I don't know." He said thoughtfully with a sly gleam in his eye. "Chizuru's so pretty, that I can't tell anymore."

"Huh!\_?" Chizuru gasped, while Kimigiku smiled. Sumiko nodded her



head in agreement.

"Told you so." Sumiko said in a singsong voice. Chizuru sweat-dropped. Was Sumiko-san drunk? That was a rare sightâ€|

"You said it!" Heisuke shouted enthusiastically as he jumped to his feet. "Chizuru's really cute, huh!\_?"

"Yeah!" Shinpachi said, also jumping up. "She's a real babe!"

"Huh? Shinpachi-san, fallen under her spell?" Okita teased.

"Idiot, don't make me blush!" Shinpachi said, grinning, as he blushed and rubbed the back of his neck while laughing good-naturedly.

"Please, stop it!" Chizuru cried as she covered her face and ran from the room to hide out on the balcony.

"Ah!" Heisuke said. "Hey, Shinpatsu! Why do you gotta say such weird stuff!\_?" He demanded, blaming him for Chizuru's hasty retreat.

"Sorry, sorry." Shinpachi apologized, smiling wryly, as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"Oh? Is it all right for you not to follow after her?" Okita asked Sumiko when she just sat there and started on her nth container of sake. "She and Hijikata-san are alone out there." He added, lowering his voice so only she could hear. Sumiko knocked back her cup of sake.

"It's fine. I'm not the tiresome kind of woman who'll try to steal away the guy her best friend likes, especially not when he clearly already feels the same for her." She replied quietly, furrowing her brow and frowning sternly in an attempt to cover up her hurt.

"Hm? So, you noticed it too, then? Sumiko-san really is sharp." Okita said.

"Right now I wish I wasn'tâ€|" She said, looking rather melancholy. She was about to pour more sake in her cup, but then she put it down and just started drinking straight from the container.

"Eh!\_? Sumiko-san!\_?" Heisuke shouted as they all stared at her while she gulped down the sake, stunned. Was she crazy!\_?

"Shut up, and leave me alone!" She snapped moodily. "I'm trying to drown my feelings over here!"

"Pfft! Hahaha! You sure are a moody drunk, aren't you, Sumiko-san?" Okita asked, laughing.

"Ah, Sumiko-san, could it be you're still upset from earlier?" Shinpachi asked nervously, hoping she wasn't a violent drunk. "All right, Sano! Do that thing you always do! That outta cheer her up!"

"Yeah! Yeah! Until you do, it doesn't feel like we're drinkin' with ya!" Heisuke said.

"Souji, go get Hijikata-san and Chizuru." Sano said.

"Hai, hai." Okita said, getting up and walking over to open the door to the balcony.

SLIDE.

"Oh, sorry to intrude." He remarked upon sensing the nice atmosphere the two of them had going on out there. He began to slide the door shut again, when Shinpachi came up from behind and stopped him.

"Hey, Hijikata-san, Sano's stomach show is about to begin." Shinpachi announced, obliviously putting the final nail in the mood's coffin, as he grinned.

"Chizuru, you hurry up and come, too!" Heisuke said, poking his head out.

"Honestly. You guys just don't quit, do you?" Hijikata said, smiling wryly, as he stood and went back into the room with the others, followed by Chizuru.

They partied the rest of the night away together. Shinpachi painted a comical face on Sano's stomach, using the scar from an old failed attempt at slicing his belly for the line separating the lips, and they all watched and laughed as he did a bizarre and entertaining dance while making his stomach 'talk'. Sumiko had finally reached the point of alcohol consumption where nothing bothered her anymore, so she was able to join in and laugh with the others. She even started doing a comical dance of her own while singing some strange Korean song that had few English words thrown in every now and then called 'Gangnam style', where she looked like she was riding an invisible horse much of the time. The others didn't really get what was going on, but that part was rather amusing in and of itself. Their laughter echoed throughout the night as Kimigiku quietly excused herself from the room for a moment with an amused smile on her face.

Her smile fell when she stood up and saw Kazama and Amagiri entering the courtyard below with someone from the Satsuma clan as she looked out the window. She hoped they weren't there to bother her guestsâ€¦|

## 27. Painted Lips

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 27: Painted Lips<br>\*</strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>January, 1867<strong>

Chizuru was walking with Okita's patrol through the city when she heard a familiar voice call out to her from among the crowd.

"Chizuru-chan!"

Chizuru stopped looked over to see a pretty girl in a yellow kimono smiling and waving at her.

"Osen-chan!" Chizuru said excitedly, rushing over to talk to her new friend. It had been awhile since their last meeting. Okita stopped when he noticed Chizuru wasn't following anymore and back tracked to find the two girls talking.

"What a coincidence. I was just about to pay a visit to your headquarters." Sen said.

"Huh?" Chizuru said, surprised.

"Actually, I heard from a geisha, one of my acquaintances, that recently, many strange warriors are using the Sumi-ya regularly for meetings." Sen said, lowering her voice in an attempt to be more discrete. "It seems they are making some dangerous plans, like attacking the Shinsengumi headquarters."

"!" Okita's expression darkened slightly when he heard that. "But even if your information is true," Okita said, alerting the girls to his presence, "it's impossible for us to just brazenly lay an ambush in Shimabara. I know!" He said thoughtfully, lifting his head as he glanced pointedly at Chizuru. "Hey, why don't you help us out for a bit?"

"Huh?" Chizuru said.

“”

"No way!" Heisuke protested when they all heard Okita's plan later that evening. "It's too dangerous for Chizuru to go undercover in Shimabara, right, Sumiko-san?" He asked, expecting at least her to back him up on this.

"Well”|" Sumiko said thoughtfully, looking carefully at Chizuru to make sure this wasn't just something Okita had pushed her into. In theory, it was a good plan, but there was still a hint of danger involved, not to mention the unpleasantly high possibility of having to deal with perverts and drunks”| "What do you want to do, Chizuru?"

"I”| I want to do what little I can to help everyone." Chizuru said earnestly, determined to do her best.

"I'm against it." Hijikata said, furrowing his brow. "What should we do if the worst happens?"

"But the clock is ticking." San'nan said. "I believe letting Yukimura-kun act as our spy is the best way to gather the information we need." The room was silent for a moment as they all debated internally on whether or not it was worth the risk to Chizuru. Sumiko was going to suggest that maybe she could do it in Chizuru's stead, but seeing how determined her friend had been to help and how down she looked to hear how reluctant the others were to let her made her change her mind.

"You guys are overreacting. She's a big girl." Sumiko said, sighing. "If it's just to disguise herself as a geisha and listen in on those samurai's conversations, then even Chizuru can do it. And she doesn't have to do it alone. I can go in with her. Between the two of us, we should be able to cut the time it would normally take for one person to cover the Sumi-ya in half, right?" She asked, winking at her friend.

"Hai!" Chizuru agreed happily, glad Sumiko was backing her up on this one.

"I think you're underestimating the danger." Hijikata told them. "Even if you're skilled with a sword, you won't be able to take it with you while pretending to be a geiko. You'll be defenseless."

"Hijikata-san, I'm perfectly capable of defending myself even without a sword." Sumiko insisted. "If you need proof, Shinpachi-san will help me demonstrate an example for you."

"Eh? I will?" Shinpachi said, taken aback.

"Yes." Sumiko said, standing up and walking to the center of the room. "Just come at me however you like."

"â€¦ Do I have to?" Shinpachi asked reluctantly, not liking where this was going at all. He had done enough sparring with her to know how this was most likely going to end. "Can't I just vouch for her?" He asked Hijikata.

"Oh? Are you scared, Shinpachi-san?" Okita asked with a sly smirk.

"N-No!" Shinpachi retorted a little more nervously than he meant to as he stood up and stepped up to face her. "Okay." He said, taking a deep breath and a moment to preparing himself. "Arhh!" He charged at Sumiko. In one swift, fluid motion she grabbed Shinpachi by the arm and pivoted on her heel as she flipped him over and pinned him on the floor. Hijikata and Kondo, who had never actually seen this for themselves before, stared at her, stunned. After a moment, she released her hold on poor Shinpachi.

"Why does it always seem like you're picking on me?" Shinpachi asked her in a low voice as she helped him up.

"Sorry." She apologized with a wry smile. "I just thought it'd look more impressive if I proved I could beat someone with your muscles." This seemed to cheer him up considerably, as he retreated back to his spot next to Sano with a proud grin. Sano smiled wryly and shook his head. Sumiko had figured out how to handle Shinpachi pretty well, hadn't she?

"Ahem. I see your point." Hijikata told Sumiko, clearing his throat. Just how many martial arts did this girl know? "However, this doesn't change the situation for Chizuru." Chizuru bowed her head in disappointment.

"Vice-commander. I will infiltrate the Sumi-ya with Yamazaki and guard the safety of Yukimura." Saito said.

"Please leave it to us." Yamazaki said, bowing. Hijikata sighed.

"That's your plan?" He asked, with a wry smile. He could tell they were all determined to let Chizuru do her part. Well, it might be for the best. Even if they wouldn't have to worry about Sumiko's safety, it was hard to imagine her being able to pull off being a geisha. Chizuru would probably have a better chance of not being found out in that sense.

"Hai." Saito and Yamazaki replied dutifully.

"Don't worry." Sano said as he and Shinpachi got up and crossed the room together to reassure Chizuru. "Well also head to Shimabara once we've finished our patrol."

"Yeah. Chief is a heavy drinker." Shinpachi said, earning a few chuckles from Kondo and the others.

"Is it really all right?" Heisuke asked dubiously, still worried about Chizuru.

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The next day, Sumiko and Chizuru had gone to Shimabara early to meet up with Sen and her geisha friend, who would be supplying them with their disguises and helping them infiltrate the Sumi-ya. It must be a small world after all, because Sen's acquaintance had turned out to be Kimigiku-san.

"Oh, so you're the famous Osen-chan, huh? Nice to meet you." Sumiko greeted the younger girl, bowing politely. "Thanks for taking care of our Chizuru."

"My pleasure." Sen said, smiling. "So, you're the Sumiko-san I've heard so much about?" She asked, looking at her with keen eyes. Sumiko made a handsome man. Her disguise seemed to suit her more than Chizuru's did.

"Well, that may depend on what you've heard." Sumiko replied, smiling wryly. "But, yes, I'm Miyagawa Sumiko." Chizuru smiled, glad the two of them were finally able to meet.

"Nice to meet you, Sumiko-san." Sen said, smiling.

"And it's nice to see you again, Kimigiku-san." Sumiko said, bowing to the geisha. "We had a lot of fun last time."

"Yes, as did I." Kimigiku said, smiling, as she returned her bow. "It is a pleasure to be able to dress you as well this time."

"Haha, well, we'll see." Sumiko said, laughing a little nervously. "I may need a little more work than Chizuru."

~~~~~

"Ahh!" Sen gasped with delight as she took in the appearance of the two girls after their transformation into geikos. They had gone the full nine yards this time since they were going undercover as professional geishas. Their pretty faces had been washed smooth with

flawless white. Their delicate lips had been painted crimson, and the pink shadows brushed onto their eyelids helped their long black lashes stand out even more dramatically against their pale faces. Their long locks were pulled up in elegant hairstyles that complimented the shape of their faces and showed off their slender necks. Kimigiku was helping them make some final adjustments to the richly colored and extravagantly decorated kimonos that they were wearing. The color scheme for Chizuru's outfit was predominantly red with dark-blue and light green, and purple; while Sumiko had been given an outfit that was predominantly light-blue with black, pink, and red.

"These clothes really suit you." Kimigiku said.

"Yep. Chizuru's a real beauty." Sumiko said, smiling proudly at her friend.

"I was referring to you as well, Miyagawa-san." Kimigiku told her, smiling wryly.

"It's true. Sumiko-san's really pretty." Chizuru said, smiling. She had always thought so, but in the geisha garb, Sumiko shined even brighter than she had before back when they were still living in Edo.

"Eh? R-Really?" Sumiko asked surprised, blushing. "Thatâ€¦| Hearing that makes me kind of happyâ€¦|" She said a little shyly, playing with the sleeve of her kimono.

"Hmm." Sen hummed, smiling in amusement. So the valiant 'Aniki' had a cute side to her, too, huh? Well, she was a girl, after all. "Show some confidence!" She told Sumiko and Chizuru. "You're both really beautiful, after all. You make handsome boys, but you make even more beautiful women!" She said brightly, giving them both a little pat on the back. Chizuru and Sumiko glanced at each other and smiled. Chizuru was still a little nervous about their assignment, but she felt better knowing that Sumiko and the others would be nearby if she needed them.

â€"â^žâ€"

"Well, we should just drink something while waiting for our turn." Sano said as he, Shinpachi, and Heisuke walked along the porch facing the inner courtyard of the teahouse later that evening.

"Yeah. Sounds fun." Shinpachi agreed. "We can thoroughly enjoy Chizuru as a geiko again, too." He added with a grin laughing.

"Will she really be all right?" Heisuke wondered out loud, still thinking about Chizuru. Sumiko would be fine since she was tough, but poor Chizuruâ€¦| "She's servin' sake to those perverted drunks and flatterin' them, and bein' touched by themâ€¦| Ahhh!" Heisuke groaned miserably just thinking about it.

"Heisuke, what are you mumblin' there?" Shinpachi asked as he and Sano turned back to look at their friend while he agonized over Chizuru's predicament. Sano smiled slightly as he correctly guessed the cause.

"Good, we'll leave Chizuru in your hands." Sano told Heisuke.

"There's a discussion us men need to have." He put his arm around Shinpachi and started leading him away.

"Huh? What discussion?" Shinpachi asked, not getting it.

"Now, now." Sano said. "How about we go check on Sumiko-san real quick?" He suggested instead of explaining. "I think she might actually be one I'm most curious about seeing this evening. After all, we've never seen her dressed as woman before, have we?"

"Oh! You're right! We'll definitely have to look in on her." Shinpachi agreed. "That 'Aniki' in women's clothingâ€¦ I can't even begin to picture it!"

"Hey, hold on you two." Heisuke called after his friends, but they just kept going, determined to do a little spying on Sumiko while he had some alone time with Chizuru.

"Pardon the intrusion!" Shinpachi said cheerfully as he threw open the door of the room Sumiko was supposed to be in.

"Oh." She said as she turned around, surprised to see them so soon. "Is something wrong?" She asked, concerned. Sano froze as he stared at her, astounded by the transformation. There were practically sparkles in the air around her, and she looked so enchantingly elegant and beautiful, that it felt as though she should have been surrounded by blooming flowers. He couldn't believe this delicate woman before him was the same person that had so easily flipped and restrained Shinpachi the previous evening. He had thought Chizuru's transformation had been amazing the last time, but Sumiko's was downright miraculousâ€¦

"Ah, sorry! We must have the wrong room." Shinpachi apologized bashfully, rubbing the back of his neck, as he started to close the door.

"It's the right room." Sano said, stopping him.

"What? It can't be. We're looking for Sumiko, remember? Look at this girl! She's a total babe! She obviously has to be their topâ€¦"

"It's me, Shinpachi-san." Sumiko deadpanned bluntly in her usual tone, dropping the geisha act completely.

"Eh!\_?" Shinpachi shouted incredulously.

"Shh! Are you trying to blow my cover?" She asked, frowning slightly in annoyance. He didn't have to look that shocked! "Don't attract any unwanted attention. Come inside and close the door if you want to talk."

"Hai, hai." Sano said, giving his dumbfounded friend a push into the room so they could sit down and have a chat. "Well, I can't say I blame you for being so surprisedâ€¦ for a moment, I thought I was looking at a different person, too." He admitted as he sat down. "After all, a while back you said these things didn't suit you, but you look pretty good." He told her, smiling wryly as he stared appreciatively at her new appearance.

"Yeah, the image I had in mind was something closer to Hijikata in drag." Shinpachi said. Sumiko and Sano sweat-dropped as they stared at him.

"You have a real way with words, Shinpachi-san." She commented dryly, extremely chagrined, as she tried to control her blush of embarrassment. "You want me to kill you?"

"And you have breasts!" Shinpachi exclaimed pointing at her chest.

"Of course I have breasts!" She shouted, glaring at him incredulously. Seriously, just what did he take her for? "Did he think she was a man pretending to be a girl who was pretending to be a man!?"

"No! I mean! "of course you have them!" He floundered, glancing at Sano for help. Unfortunately for him, Sano was taking Sumiko's side on this one. There were some things you just shouldn't say to a woman. "B-But before they were pretty much non-existent, and now they're there! What did you do, stuff your kimono? They look real!" He said, reaching out a hand towards her chest to test his theory.

SMACK!

"That's because they are! I've just been strapping them down this whole time!" She snapped furiously, slapping his hand away before it could land. "Hmph! Whatever!" She said, furrowing her brow, as she stood up and headed for the door. "I thought you guys came in because you had something important to tell me, but if all you're gonna do is tease me and mess with me, then I'm leaving! I'll go find somewhere else to play spy. Maybe Chizuru's having more luck!" She slammed the door shut behind her and stalked off in a huff. Sano sighed heavily.

"You just had to open your big mouth!"

## 28. Clandestine Meetings

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 28: Clandestine Meetings<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"Thank you." Chizuru said as she poured Heisuke some sake. "You're here because you're worried about me, right?" Heisuke nervously gulped back his cup of sake, blushing heavily to be alone with her while she looked so beautiful. She moved to pour him some more sake but paused when she noticed how he was staring at her.<p>

"Heisuke-kun. Is something wrong?" She asked.

"N-Not really!" He mumbled, looking away, as he tried not to blush any more than he already was.



"Why are you looking away?" She asked.

"Well, becauseâ€¦" He cautiously glanced back at her and soon found himself in danger of being mesmerized by her doll-like appearance again. "It's 'cause you're dressed like that. You're so pretty, and yet you're serving other menâ€¦ Aaah! I can't except this!" He shouted abruptly, jumping to his feet. "That's why, I was against it from the start!"

"Eh?" Chizuru said, blinking in confusion as he headed for the door.

"I'll talk to Kondo-san and Hijikata-san now! Don't leave this room, Chizuru!" He told her as he dashed off with a determined roar, leaving her all alone.

"Heisuke-kun?" Chizuru called after him as she carefully gathered up the folds of her extravagant kimono and crossed the room to look out the open doorway. Heisuke had departed with such speed, that he had already disappeared well beyond her sight and reach. 'Heisuke-kunâ€¦' she thought, staring down the empty walkway as she wondered whether or not he would be all right. He had been acting so strangelyâ€¦ "!" Chizuru gasped, turning, when she felt the presence of someone behind her. It was that oni, Kazama.

"Hnh." He said, smirking slightly as he looked down at her with a trace of amusement dancing in his crimson eyes.

"Ah, umâ€¦" Chizuru said nervously, caught between asking him what he was doing there and preparing to run.

"Hurry up and prepare some sake." He told her calmly.

"Huh?" Chizuru said, surprised. Did he not recognize her? He tilted his head slightly in the direction of the sound of a bunch of rowdy men laughing in a room across the courtyard.

"I got tired of that stupid ruckus, so I left." Kazama said, glancing back at her. "Drinking sake with those rotten men would be blasphemy to the sake."

Chizuru's eyes widened slightly. He really didn't seem to recognize her at all. She should probably consider herself lucky, butâ€¦

"Move it. You're a geiko here, aren't you?" He said.

"Ah, yes!" Chizuru said nervously, quickly going back inside the room to do as he asked. It was more important than ever now that she didn't blow her cover...!

After she ordered the sake, the two of them sat in silence for a moment or two. She was starting to wish she and Sumiko hadn't split up. Sumiko would know what to do if she were thereâ€¦ Well, for now, she had to do her best to keep up her act as a geiko.

"The sake will be ready soon." Chizuru said, bowing her head slightly out of politeness. "Please wait a momentâ€¦"

"Although you're a geiko, you speak in a common tone." Kazama

remarked. "Strange. Is this your first time?"

"M-My deepest apologies." Chizuru said nervously, immediately changing her tone to sound more like a professional geiko. "Iâ€"Ah, no. My humble self just started here, and hasn't become used to this yet." Kazama simply continued to stare stoically at her.

"If you were a geiko of Shimabara, then you'd have been raised here." He told her.

"Huh!\_?" Chizuru gasped, flinching in shock, when she realized the severity of the mistake she had just made. "Umâ€" That's right! Forgive me, I must have remembered wrongly." She said quickly.

"Is such a mistake even possible?" Kazama asked.

"Ah, umâ€" wellâ€" Chizuru stumbled nervously for a plausible explanation.

"Hmph." Kazama smirked as he watched her struggle.

'Wh-What do I do?' Chizuru wondered anxiously as she fell silent. 'If Sumiko-san were hereâ€"'

"Now then, shall we end this little play, Yukimura Chizuru?" Kazama asked, deciding they had delayed enough already.

"Ah!" She gasped, furrowing her brow, as she realized too late that she had fallen into his trap.

"You most likely received orders from the Shinsengumi to inquire the motives of the roshi here." He deduced correctly, narrowing his eyes slightly as he spoke. He didn't like it, humans using a female oni for something like this.

"So, you knew all along?" Chizuru asked.

"Did you think I wouldn't recognize you?" He asked, moving closer.

"!" Chizuru gasped when he reached out and grabbed her by the chin, tilting her face up towards his own. His grip was firm but gentle. She furrowed her brow as she stared back at him, doing her best not to look afraid.

"My eyes definitely weren't wrong about you." Kazama told her. "This appearance makes you suitable to be my wife."

"Eh?" Chizuru said, caught off-guard. His wife!\_?

"Now I want to make you mine even more." He said, pressing closer, as she tried to push him away. "And that annoying bodyguard of yours isn't here to stop me today, is she?"

"Let me go! I'm not your wife!" She protested as he grabbed the wrist of the hand trying to hold him at bay.

"I'm praising you." He told her, leaning in even closer.

"S-Stop!" Chizuru begged. They're lips were only inches apart now.

"S-Sumiko-san!"

\_SLIDE.\_

Kazama glanced up as the door slide open, expecting to see that half-oni glaring fiercely at him again.

SMACK!

With a swift flick of the wrist, Sen quickly snapped the blond oni sharply on the head with a closed fan.

"Mnh!" Kazama grunted in pain and irritation from the unexpected attack. To the untrained eye, it seemed like a simple enough attack, but it had enough power packed behind it to knock even Kazama off balance for a few moments.

"That's enough!" Sen said sternly as she stared down at him in disapproval.

"Osen-chan!" Chizuru exclaimed, surprised and relieved to see a friendly face. Kimigiku-san was standing just behind her.

"Chizuru-chan, hurry up and run away." Sen urged her.

"You bitch!" Kazama growled dangerously, trembling with anger, as he lifted his hand from his aching head.

"What?" Osen said, glaring challengingly at him as Chizuru gasped and quickly began gathering up the skirts of her kimono so she could make a run for it.

"Wait! I'm not finished talking yet!" Kazama called after Chizuru as she slipped out the door and ran to safety while silently thanking her brave friend, hoping she and Kimigiku-san would be all right.

"A man who is too persistent won't be welcomed." Sen said as he stood up and moved to follow after her friend.

"What?" He said, stopping, as he glanced back at the other female oni.

"It's only natural that your behavior would annoy Chizuru-chan. Any girl would be." Sen continued calmly.

"Hmph. I thought I would be able to capture her today without that komainu around, but then you showed." Kazama said as he walked back over to them and took a seat, deciding he may as well finish his sake.

"Komainu?" Sen asked, furrowing her brow slightly in confusion.

"The half-oni girl who's always with her, Miyagawa Sumiko. Every time I see her, she always furrows her brow deeply and glares fiercely at me while trying to protect Yukimura Chizuru." He explained, picking up his cup.

"Well, it's no wonder!" Sen huffed. "You're trying to kidnap someone she views as a best friend and younger sister. Sumiko-san must hate

your guts. Kazama Chikage, you don't know how to court a woman at all, do you?"

"Oh? You want to lecture me on courting women?" He asked calmly, staring down at his cup of sake.

"Hmph. Even if you have been carefully educated as the head of your clan since childhood, Kazama, you cannot force the woman you fancy to be with you. Do you understand? Moreover, you must first understand her heart and respect her wishes! Are you even listening!?" Sen demanded indignantly, stopping her rambling lecture when she noticed Kazama seemed more interested in his sake than paying attention to her.

"Hn? What did you say?" He asked, glancing at her as he lowered his empty sake cup.

"I \_said,\_ have you ever considered what women want?" She asked pointedly.

"Nonsense. Why would I ever need to consider such things?" He asked, pouring himself another cup of sake.

Sen and Kimigiku stared at him, stunned. Was he serious?

SLIDE.

"Greetings to you all." Sumiko said politely, gracefully imitating the way she had seen Kimigiku greet guests, closing her eyes as she bowed deeply before lifting her head. Kazama stared at her with a look of open astonishment on his face. It took a moment for him to recognize her without those scruffy bangs in her eyes and the lack of scowling expression on her face, but he knew it was her. The komainu had finally come, but in this moment, he had to admit she looked more like a goddess than the beast meant to protect one. She wasn't wearing any more makeup than Chizuru, so the fact that she was now even more beautiful than her meant Miyagawa Sumiko's male disguise must have been more involved than he thought. The transformation was unbelievable.

"!" Sumiko said, frozen in place for a moment when her dark eyes met his crimson orbs. She managed to keep the smile on her face as she very calmly reached for the door and began sliding it shut again. "My apologies, honored guest! I appears I have the wrong room." Well, her performance as a geiko was better than Chizuru's, he would give her that. But did she really think she could fool him? He was about to call her back, when she suddenly slide the door wide open again. "Eh? Kimigiku-san? Osen-chan!?" She exclaimed in surprise when the identities of the other two people who were in the room with him finally registered after her initial shock of finding such a dangerous enemy in Chizuru's room with no Chizuru. "Quick, come here! That person is dangerous!" She whisper-yelled at them, trying to get them to make a run for it. "Where's Chizuru?"

"I can hear you." Kazama remarked, furrowing his brow slightly at the way he was being ignored. Normally she wouldn't dare take her eyes off of him. He felt a sliver of satisfaction when Sumiko finally looked at him, but her brow was furrowed again, and her body language indicated that she was on edge just being around him.

"It's all right, Sumiko-san." Sen said. "We already saved Chizuru-chan. She ran away, and now I'm trying to teach this guy some manners. Any suggestions?" Sumiko blinked.

"Um, yeahâ€¦ leave while you still can?" Sumiko said, confused. \_They\_ saved Chizuru from \_him\_â€¦? How did they manage to pull that off?

"But we aren't finished talking yet." Sen replied calmly.

"Miyagawa Sumiko. Unless you want your cover blown, I suggest you come inside and pour me some sake." Kazama said. "You're supposed to be a geiko right now, aren't you?" Sumiko frowned as she finished entering the room and closed the door behind her, but instead of taking a seat next to him and doing as he had asked, she sat down beside Sen and glared defiantly at him.

"Sorry, but I don't feel like pouring a drink for the guy who called me a 'mongrel'." She replied stiffly. Sen's jaw dropped, and she gaped at Kazama in disbelief.

"I can't believe you! You really are the worst, you know." Sen scolded him, also glaring now.

"If you're not going to pour me a drink, then why bother coming in?" Kazama asked, narrowing his eyes slightly.

"Well, I can't just leave Chizuru's new friends alone with a would-be kidnapper, can I?" Sumiko retorted, narrowing her own eyes back at him.

"Hmph. I'd have thought you would be more interested in finding Yukimura Chizuru after learning she had run away." He said.

"I'm not the only one Chizuru has looking out for her." Sumiko replied with a smirk. "She'll be fine as long as she has those guys around to protect her."

"She ran away! After her!" A rough voice shouted as the footsteps of several men could be heard running past outside the room.

"Eh?" Sumiko said, glancing at the silhouettes running past the outer doors.

"Dammit! Where is she?"

"Are you sure?" Kazama asked, smirking. It was obvious Yukimura Chizuru had gotten herself into some kind of trouble.

"Yeah, she'll be fine." Sumiko said, sweat-dropping, as she smiled wryly. At the very least, they still hadn't caught her yet. She must have found out something good if they were going so far as to actually chase her.

"Anyway, you didn't come here for Chizuru-chan today, did you?" Sen asked Kazama.

"So what?" Kazama said, staring calmly at the younger girl.

"Huh?" Sumiko said, glancing between the two of them. From the way they were talking, she was starting to get the feeling these two knew each other somehow prior to this evening.

"If you want to hear more of this conversation, you'll have to pour my sake for me." Kazama stated calmly, glancing back at her. Sumiko frowned, but to their surprise, she got up and moved to serve him.

"Fine." She said curtly as she picked up the sake container and pour another serving into his cup. Maybe she would be able to find out what this creep was really up to. "Here you go." He smirked slightly as he took a sip, watching the fuming woman beside him out the corner of his eye.

"As I thought." Sen said, frowning in disapproval at him. "You were probably here to find out the purpose of other states and the roshi." Kazama just sipped his sake. "The suddenly, Chizuru-chan appeared. You thought she was walking into a trap, so you tried to take her."

"Eh?" Sumiko said, surprised, furrowing her brow in disbelief. She didn't see him as the type to save a damsel in distress, rather, she thought he would be more likely to be the doing the distressing, given her and Chizuru's past experience with him. Kazama just kept calmly sipping his sake.

"What happened next was an absolute don't." Sen continued. Kazama finally lowered his cup and looked at the oni female across from him. "You really need to learn how to read the mood."

"This sake isn't bad." Kazama commented as he held his cup out for Sumiko to pour him a another serving. As he thought, sake was better when poured by a beautiful woman, even one who was a komainu.

"Be honest, what do you really think of Chizuru-chan?" Sen asked him.

"The Oni blood Yukimura Chizuru possesses is one in a million because it belongs to one of the most powerful Oni clans from the original bloodline."

"Eh?" Sen and Sumiko both said as they stared at him, stunned. What the hell?

"The birthrate of female oni is twenty percent of the entire population, and those of the original bloodline are even more precious." He explained for Sumiko's benefit, since she no doubt knew nothing of their ways. "There is a one in five probability for a female oni to be like this. Yukimura is invaluable. To protect our lineage, it doesn't matter whether there is love between us or not."

'It matters to Chizuru.' Sumiko thought, frowning.

"So, you're only looking for a marriage with Chizuru-chan to perpetuate the Oni lineage?" Sen asked, surprised.

'Wait, she knows about oni?' Sumiko thought, glancing at Sen.

"What else could it be?" Kazama asked boredly as he began eating the fish he had Kimigiku order for him. Sen stared at him, astounded.

"Oh, I don't knowâ€¦ world domination?" Sumiko suggested. "With the way you kept popping up out of nowhere, threatening us, and fighting the guys whose protection we're under, we kind of figured you had to be up to something pretty nefarious." She explained frankly when they all gave her a strange look. "But taking a step back for a momentâ€¦ Osen-chan, since you seem to know Kazama and know about oni, could it be you and Kimigiku-san are oni, too?"

"Yep." Sen replied with a smile. "There's that legendary sharpness I've about from Chizuru-chan. She said you were good at reading people."

"Hime-sama is also a female oni of the original bloodline." Kimigiku added with the hint of a sly smile as she glanced from Sumiko to Kazama.

"Huh!\_?" Sen and Sumiko said, staring incredulously at the geisha, wondering what she was thinking mentioning something like that after what they had just heard. Wasn't it bad enough he was already after Chizuru!\_?

"Do you wish to be taken by me?" Kazama asked Sen.

"Eh?" Sumiko said. Seriously? Just like that!\_? He really was okay with just anybodyâ€¦

"Absolutely not." Sen replied, waving her hand.

"Hn." Kazama smirked slightly as he took a sip of his sake.

"What about Sumiko-san?" Kimigiku asked. "She's a beauty, is she not?"

"Kimigiku-sanâ€¦" Sumiko said, sweat-dropping, as her eyebrow twitched, clearly chagrined. Kazama glanced at her out the corner of his eye. "Well, I'm probably the only one of us who's really 'safe'. After all, I'm only half oni, and I have no clue who my parents were, so who knows how far removed from the original blood line I am."

"Eh? I thought Chizuru-chan said both your parents were doctors?" Sen said, surprised.

"The Miyagawas adopted me when I was about thirteen. I grew up in and out of an orphanage." Sumiko replied calmly.

"Oh, I'm sorryâ€¦" Sen said, raising a hand to cover her mouth.

"Don't be. I'm not. I'm glad I was able to meet the Miyagawas." She said, smiling softly at the memory of her adopted parents. "They were interesting people."

'Hmm? So, this komainu can actually make a face like that, tooâ€¦' Kazama thought, surprised to see Sumiko with such a gentle and loving expression on her face.

"That woman! Where did she go?" A man shouted again as he ran past outside. It sounded like Chizuru still had them on the ropes.

"Anyway, if a man wants to make love to a woman," Sen said, getting back on topic, "the first thing to do is behave. Right, Sumiko-san?"

"Look out!" Another shout came from outside.

"Right. You should know that taking women by force isn't what real men do." Sumiko said, setting down the sake container as she stood up and stepped around him to head for the door. "Trust me on this. Men who make women cry are the worst. If you're serious about someone, you should try to make them fall in love with your attitude." She paused with her hand on the door, poised to open it. "But in this case it would probably be better if you gave up. Just because you like someone doesn't mean you're meant to be together." She furrowed her brow as she glanced back at him determinedly over her shoulder. "I don't know much about oni or any of this bloodline business you keep harping on about, and frankly, I don't really care. What I do care about is Chizuru. She already has someone she likes. If you do anything to interfere with her happinessâ€¦ I'll make you regret it." She said resolutely, narrowing her eyes at him as a warning, before glancing at Sen and Kimigiku. "It sound like things are getting serious out there again, so I'll be going now. If he tries anything, feel free to scream. I'll come running immediately." She said, flashing them a handsome smile, before slipping out of the room to help her friends. The three oni stared after her for a moment before resuming their conversation.

"See?" Sen said, turning back to Kazama. "Although, Sumiko-san is a woman, that was a good example of chivalry just now. It's a good thing she wasn't wearing her male disguise just then, or I might have fallen in loveâ€¦" She said thoughtfully. "That girl puts the 'prince' in 'princess'."

"Hmph. You're saying in order to be a better man, I should be more like a woman?" Kazama asked skeptically, somewhat annoyed that he had lost his sake pourer.

"That woman, at least." Sen said pointedly.

"Yamazaki's ninja arts, Tatami Roll-back!" A young man shouted.

CRASH!

"A ninja!?"

"Wow! Amazing, Yamazaki-san!" They heard Sumiko cheer.

"Hey! This woman's even better!"

WHAM!

"Watch it, pervert! Try to touch me there again, and you'll loose that hand!" Sumiko growled dangerously.



"Whoa! She just threw him across the yard!"

"Miyagawa-san! Take Yukimura-kun and run!"

"Come on, Chizuru!"

"Moh!" Sen exclaimed, furrowing her brow in annoyance as she abruptly stood up, irritated that Kazama seemed to be more interested in listening to the commotion going on outside than to her. "What the hell are they doing out there? Wait here for a moment while I see what's happening!" She said firmly, glancing back at him. "We're not done talking yet!" She turned and left the room in a huff, followed close behind by Kimigiku. The geisha/kunoichi shut the door behind them. Kazama took another sip of sake.

"Unfortunately, I don't have anymore free time left." He said, smirking slightly as he set down his cup and stood up to leave.

## 29. The Flurried Dance of Commotion

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 29: The Flurried Dance of Commotion<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Kazama could still hear the ruckus from the ongoing fight as he started making his way back to meet up with the men from the Satsuma clan.<p>

"Come and get me!"

"Don't underestimate geikos, you bastards! Show some damn respect!"

"Ah! That's no geiko! That's an oni!"

Kazama smirked. Those men had no idea how close to the mark they really were with that comment.

"Wait, woman!"

"Hn?" Kazama said, turning when he heard soft and fast footsteps approaching him from behind. Yukimura Chizuru had just rounded the corner and was heading his way. She seemed to be too preoccupied with the man chasing her to notice this, though.

"Eh?" Chizuru gasped, surprised, when she nearly ran into him.

"Oh? Did you come back to let me take you?" Kazama asked her.

"Kazama-san!\_" Chizuru said, taking a step back.

"Well, looks like I've caught ya!" A drunken rogue samurai said as he wandered up behind them, reaching for Chizuru.

"No! Please, don't!" Chizuru started to yell.

"Back off, pervert!" Sumiko shouted as she took Chizuru's would-be molester out with a beautiful flying kick that caused the skirts of her kimono to fly up slightly and give them a nice view of her legs up to her knees.

"S-Sumiko-san!" Chizuru said, blushing out of embarrassment on her friend's behalf.

"Man, these guys are persistent! Are you all right, Chizuru?" Sumiko said, trailing off when she noticed Kazama. "Wait, weren't you just?"

"Heheh!" Another drunk pervert exclaimed as he suddenly came out of nowhere and threw his arms around her. "Gottcha!"

"Ugh!" Sumiko grimaced. Kazama narrowed his eyes and stepped forward, grabbing her by the hand and pulling her away from the leech. "Huh?" She said, surprised to find herself being rescued.

"What the?" "Ah!?" The man who grabbed her exclaimed in pain and surprise when Kazama grabbed him by the wrist as he stuck his foot out to trip the other man, and twisted his arm behind his back. Kazama knocked the troublesome man unconscious and let him drop to the floor with a thud.

"Um... thanks." Sumiko said a little awkwardly. "But I could've handled him." It felt weird to suddenly be saved by a guy who had insulted her and tried to kidnap her best friend.

"Hmph. I know." Kazama said with a slight smirk as he glanced back at her.

"Eh?" Chizuru said.

"Oi, oi! You think you have enough guts to fight me!?" The three of them glanced up when they heard Heisuke's voice.

"I'm on your side, hothead!" Shinpachi said. They could hear the grin in his voice.

"Um, this..." Chizuru began as Kazama turned and walked up to look over the balcony into the courtyard below.

"Pick fights with us, and we'll return the favor!" Sano said.

The two girls approached the balcony, too, and saw that Sano, Shinpachi, Heisuke were having a rough and rowdy free-for-all fight with the roshi and anyone else who happened to come at them. Sumiko sighed.

"Looks like our covert mission ended up turning into a battle royale..." She commented, smiling wryly, as she sweat-dropped.

"Hmph. Thanks to you people, my investigation for Satsuma seems to end here." Kazama said.

"What's all this noise?" One of the men from the room on the corner just a few feet away from them asked as he stepped out to have a look for himself. Kazama and the girls turned to look at him just as more men started coming out after him. "Oh, very good! They're really going at it!" Judging by the small crests on their haoris, they seemed to be from the Satsuma clan.

"I really enjoyed this evening." Kazama said, glancing back at the girls over his shoulder.

"Huh?" Chizuru said, while Sumiko blinked and glanced Chizuru, assuming he was talking to her.

"Now, hurry up and disappear." Kazama said as the men from the Satsuma clan started to approach him.

"Kazama, what are you doing here?"

The two girls quickly and quietly bowed to him and left before they ended up getting dragged into Satsuma's business, too. Kazama smirked slightly as he watched them escape together out the corner of his eye.

“あゝ”

"Come on, Chizuru." Sumiko said, leading her friend to collect their shoes so they could leave the Sumi-ya. "We need to get you back to headquarters so you can tell Kondo-san and Hijikata-san what you found out."

"Ah, but the others are still—" Chizuru said as Sumiko lifted part of the shop's curtain aside for her to step through, trailing off and stopping when she saw Hijikata standing a few yards away, staring at the entrance, as though he had already been coming to get her. Sumiko glanced over her friend's shoulder and smiled a little wanly.

"Go ahead." She said, giving her friend a gentle push forward. "Hijikata-san will take care of you. I'll go see to the others."

"Eh?" Chizuru said as she stumbled out of the shop entrance. She glanced back but Sumiko was already gone.

"Chizuru?" Hijikata called out when he saw her, surprised by how beautiful she looked.

"Hai." Chizuru said, smiling shyly, as she stepped forward to meet him.

“あゝ”

"Hm?" Kazama said, furrowing his brow slightly when he caught sight of Sumiko running out to join the noisy brawl in the courtyard below without Chizuru. What did she think she was doing?

"Kazama, are you listening to—" Oh! The man who had been lecturing him for suddenly disappearing said, perking up when he saw what the oni was staring down at. "Now there's a beauty entering the fray!" He exclaimed as he and the other men turned their attention back to watching the fight. Her movements were so fluid and graceful, it

almost looked like she was dancing with her opponents.

"Oh! Our avenging angel is back!" Sano said, grinning, as Sumiko blazed her own path over to them with fists and feet.

"Somehow, it's even scarier seeing her take down so many men while dressed like that!" Shinpachi remarked.

"You want a piece of me, too?" Sumiko asked tartly.

"Eh? You're not still mad about earlier are you?"

"Why? What happened earlier?" Heisuke asked.

"Not now. I just came to tell you guys Chizuru's safe." Sumiko said. "It's time for us to skedaddle!"

"Eh? No way! It was just getting good!" Heisuke said.

"Well, be sure to hold onto that feeling while you're being scolded again by Hijikata-san later!" Sumiko advised him.

"Geh!\_?" Heisuke blanched at the thought. "You wouldn't tell him, would you?"

"He already knows. Who do you think I left Chizuru with? You guys are so loud the whole of Shimabara can hear!" She chided them.

"Aw, man! We're so dead!" Shinpachi exclaimed.

"Well, if we're already that deep in it, we might as well take our time and enjoy ourselves!" Sano said. "Let's do the geikos a favor and clear out all the rubbish. After you, Sumiko-san!"

"Well, if you insist!" She said, charging forth with a rueful smile.

"Hmph." Kazama said, smirking as he leaned against the railing and continued watching their spectacle of a fight with the men from Satsuma. It looked like the komainu was enjoying herself.

“^”

"A-ah. We got scolded big time!" Sumiko said, sighing tiredly, as she joined Chizuru in their room back at headquarters later that evening.

"Ah. Sorry, Sumiko-san, If I hadn't!" Chizuru began to apologize.

"No, no. Don't worry about it. It's not your fault Heisuke and the others got too excited and openly declared themselves as members of the Shinsengumi half way through." Sumiko said, smiling wryly.

"Anyway, let me see your ankle. I heard from Hijikata-san you sprained it on the way back. I'll wrap it for you while I tell you what \_I\_ happened to overhear this evening!"

"Eh? You were able to gather some information too in all of that, Sumiko-san?" Chizuru asked, surprised. "Why didn't you say so sooner?"

We could have gone back together."

"Ah, but then you wouldn't have gotten to have a walk back with Hijikata-san all to yourself, would you?" Sumiko asked knowingly with a wan smile. Chizuru blushed. "Besides, what I heard has nothing to do with what they sent us in to investigate." She added as she started bandaging Chizuru's ankle, even though it was almost already healed anyway. "You ran into Kazama while you were still on your own, right?"

"Eh? Ah, yes." Chizuru said, nodding. "How did you know?"

"I heard from Osen-chan that she saved you." Sumiko replied with a wry smile. "How on earth did she manage that, by the way?"

"Osen-chan hit him on the head with her fan." Chizuru replied, blinking. So she had met Osen-chan, too?

Sumiko paused for a moment as an image of that popped into her head.

"Pfft! Haha! Oh, man! I wish I'd been there to see that!" She laughed. "Osen-chan's the best!"

"I-It wasn't very funny at the time! I was worried about whether or not Osen-chan would be able to get away all right afterwards!" Chizuru said, a little flustered at the memory.

"Yeah, don't worry. Osen-chan and Kimigiku-san were just fine when I ran into them later." Sumiko reassured her, smiling brightly in amusement. "In fact, it was mostly thanks to them that I was able to learn what I did!"

"Which was?" Chizuru asked a little nervously.

"Why Kazama keeps coming after you." Sumiko said, frowning, as the conversation took a more serious turn, and she began recounting the conversation between Sen and Kazama that she had been witness to earlier in the evening.

"No way!"

"N-No way!" Chizuru said, stunned, after hearing Kazama's arbitrary reasoning and learning that her new friend Sen and the geisha Kimigiku-san were also oni.

"Yeah I know." Sumiko said, sighing. "I told him to give up and find someone else, but I doubt he'll pay any attention to that. He doesn't seem like the type to listen to others." Although, he did seem to have made more of an effort to be nice to Chizuru after Sen scolded him. "Don't worry." Sumiko said, smiling reassuringly at her troubled friend. "No matter what happens, I've got your back, and so do the others. We won't let them take you away without a fight. Come on, let's get to bed. Inoue-san said he thinks it'll snow tomorrow, so we'll need our energy to play in it!" She ended on a happier note to cheer Chizuru up.

I own nothing but my OC.

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## ><p><strong>Chapter 30: The Dance of Snow<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Kazama Chikage was smoking his kiseru and lounging languidly in the open window of his room while watching the snow fell gently on the capital from the pale morning sky.<p>

"Snow covers the whole street." He remarked, smiling slightly to himself at the sight. "Humans are foolish creatures, but watching the snow fall on the city of Kyoto is not bad."

"Kazama, are you listening to me?" Amagiri asked as he stared at the younger oni in his charge. If he were capable of catching a cold, Amagiri would have scolded him for sitting out in the cold air with only that thin kimono on and nothing covering his legs. Kazama sighed, hanging his head slightly.

"Not really. Your voice is annoying." He replied frankly. All Amagiri ever did was nag. "Remember to keep an eye on the safety confirmation of Emperor Koumei." He ordered calmly, proving that he had been listening to some extent.

"What do you plan to do next, then?" Amagiri asked. Kazama raised his head and looked out the window. "I know that recently you haven't been showing much concern for the feudatories' actions."

"We must repay the debt of gratitude owed to Satsuma by our ancestors." Kazama said as he watched a cuckoo bird flit around the bare branches of the tree outside while it sang. "However, Satsuma has joined forces with Choshu. Soon the reign of the of the Bakufu will end. Satsuma threw itself into the power struggle on court and rose with power, ultimately for the purpose of overthrowing the Tokugawa Shogunate." The cuckoo flapped its wings and flew away with a shriek, sending some the snow that had settled on the branches falling to the ground. "We Oni have no obligation to support them to that extent." He said firmly as he watched the bird disappear into the pale winter sky as it flew through the drifting snow.

"You're right." Amagiri said calmly, closing his eyes. "But in present terms, shouldn't we oni be undertaking the task Satsuma entrusted to us?"

"Hmph." Kazama smirked slightly. "Suppose the snow stops tomorrow? Then we shall see how that female oni's livelihood in the Village of Yase is."

"Understood."

"The snow falls, like dancing flower petals, eh?" Kazama said as he gazed up into the pale, ice-blue sky and held a hand out to catch a snowflake. It was the same color as that komainu's kimono the previous evening, when he had watched her dance about while battling her opponents.

â€"â^žâ€"

Sumiko and Chizuru had just finished getting dressed for the day when a familiar voice called out to them from outside their room.

"Hey, Chizuru! Sumiko! You awake yet?" Heisuke asked.

"Heisuke-kun?" Chizuru said.

"What is it?" Sumiko called out as she crossed the room to open the door. "Isn't too early for you to be thisâ€|"

"Wow!" Chizuru gasped in amazement as both girls stared out at the beautiful, white winter wonderland their courtyard had become overnight.

"Look! Isn't it awesome?" Heisuke said proudly as he stood out in the middle of it all, waiting for them. "Hurry up and come out!"

"Sure!" The two girls said excitedly, smiling as they ran out to join him for some fun in the snow.

"Hm?" Sano said as he and Shinpachi came over, attracted by the sound of their laughter. Chizuru and Heisuke were having fun stomping around in the snow, making the first footprints, while Sumiko was lying on her back, making a snow angel. "You guys sure are energetic." He commented with a smile.

"Yup!" Sumiko said, grinning like a kid, as she hopped up and brushed herself off. She loved playing in the snow.

"Good morning!" Chizuru greeted them cheerfully.

"Man, how can you play outside in this cold?" Shinpachi asked.

"Says someone who walks around half-naked the whole year, Shinpatsu-san." Heisuke retorted.

"You stupid or something? Hiding these beautiful muscles of mine just 'cause it's cold would be a crime." Shinpachi responded with a grin.

SPLAT.

The next thing Shinpachi knew, an extremely cold snowball had hit him square in the chest.

"Bleh!" Shinpachi exclaimed, cringing and shivering, as he quickly tried to brush it off while hopping around from one foot to another. "Ah! Cold!"

"Ahahaha!" Heisuke laughed proudly at the results of his handiwork.

"Nice one." Sumiko said, smirking, while Chizuru smiled wryly.

Chizuru soon found herself staring while Shinpachi and Sano crouched down into position to face off against Heisuke and Sumiko for a snowball fight. There was already a substantial pile of snowballs

made and ready to go by each one of them.

"Heisuke, you little—" Shinpachi said, grinning wickedly with the promise of retribution in his eyes.

"You sure you wanna pick that side, Sumiko-san?" Sano asked.

"Oh, yeah." She said, smirking deviously. "I still haven't repaid Shinpachi-san for those rude comments he made last night—"

"Eh? You're still mad about that!?" Shinpachi asked, suddenly feeling as though he had entered the lion's den.

"You still haven't apologized for it." She retorted tartly, narrowing her eyes slightly at him.

"Shinpachi— You're gonna get massacred." Sano said, smiling wryly, as he laughed.

"Don't just stand there, Chizuru! You're on our side." Sumiko said as she glanced over at her friend, smiling.

"Nn!" Chizuru said, smiling happily as she joined Sumiko and Heisuke.

"Eh? You're taking Chizuru, too?" Shinpachi asked, disappointed she wouldn't be on his and Sano's side.

"Of course. Because you wouldn't dare hit \_her\_, would you?" Sumiko said, smirking.

"Ah! That's playing dirty!" Shinpachi said.

"Hahaha! All's fair in love and war, Shinpachi-san." Sumiko declared boldly.

"Back in our neighborhood in Edo, they used to call Sumiko-san the 'Snowball Shogun'." Chizuru said, smiling brightly.

"Eh!?" Shinpachi exclaimed.

"Heh. You picked the worst possible person to make your enemy today, didn't you?" Sano asked him, smiling wryly. "Take this!" He called out, throwing the first snowball, kicking off the start of their snowball fight. Back and forth, they tossed their frozen ammunition, until Heisuke decided to kick it up a notch by grabbing an icicle to use to shred any snowballs that came his way.

"The hothead is getting serious." Sano commented, smirking.

"Hahaha! Here's the finisher!" Shinpachi said, grinning deviously, as he hurled a snowball in Heisuke and Sumiko's direction. It sailed straight past them and slammed into the trunk of the tree they were standing under with a resounding crack.

"Your aim sucks!" Heisuke told him, smirking.

"!" Sumiko said, quickly tucking into a somersault and rolling out of there just in time to avoid being buried by the mini avalanche of snow that was shaken loose from its boughs. Heisuke was not so



lucky.

"Ah!" He cried out in surprise and alarm as he disappeared under the thick blanket of snow.

"Phew! That was close!" Sumiko said, wiping her brow.

"Heisuke-kun!" Chizuru shouted with concern.

"Don't worry, Chizuru, he'll be!" Sumiko started to reassure her when she suddenly whipped her head around, sensing a disturbance in the force.

Heisuke grunted as he fought to free himself and popped his head up out of the snow.

"That was mean, Shinpachi-san!" Heisuke exclaimed, grinning. "Huh?" His expression fell when he realized the person looming ominously over him was actually a very pissed-off looking Hijikata. "H-Hijikata-san!\_?"

"Heisuke." Hijikata said in a dangerously calm tone. "What happened over there?" He asked, pointing across the courtyard at a row of doors, whose paper screens had been ruined and riddled with holes after being repeatedly pelted with stray snowballs from their fight.

"Well, that's!" Heisuke said hesitantly, breaking out into a nervous sweat, as he jumped to his feet. "Right, right! We weren't playing around! This is training! We can practice our overall reflexes like this! And Shinpachi-san!" he said quickly, pointing over at Shinpachi's side of the warzone.

"What about Shinpachi?" Hijikata asked sternly. The only one he could see was Heisuke.

"Eh!\_?" Heisuke gasped when he realized the spot he had been pointing to was completely empty, he quickly glanced around for the others and spotted them all hiding behind a tree on the complete opposite side of the courtyard. Shinpachi and Sano were smirking while they restrained Chizuru to keep her from running out to try help Heisuke and get herself in trouble in the process, and Sumiko was holding a hand over her friend's mouth to silence her, giving him an apologetic smile.

'Sorry Heisuke, but we'll always remember your brave sacrifice!!' Sumiko thought, saying a silent prayer that Hijikata would by some miracle have mercy on his soul.

Heisuke very slowly turned back to face Hijikata, full of trepidation.

"Well, like I said!" He said, laughing nervously, as he braced himself.

\_SMACK!\_

"Oww!" Poor Heisuke wailed in pain from the force behind Hijikata's angry blow.

## 31. A Gathering of Oni

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 31: A Gathering of Oni<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Sen and Kimigiku, who had discarded her elegant geisha kimono for the garb of a female ninja, were carefully making their way back home using a path on the outskirts of the city. The woods around them were golden in the light of the setting sun.<p>

"!" Kimigiku gasped when she sensed a possible threat ahead, furrowing her brow, as she stopped abruptly and held out an arm to signal for the princess to stop, too.

"Nn." Sen furrowed her brow, wondering who the intruder was, when Amagiri Kyuju stepped out from behind one of the trees by the village gate. "Amagiri\_!\_?"

"I apologize for intruding without permission." The red-haired oni said politely.

"This road leads to Yase. What are you doing here?" Kimigiku asked.

"I just wanted to see it for once." Kazama said as he stepped out through village gate, smirking. "The place where you court-ingratiating people have been fending for yourselves while living on our opposite side."

"Kazama? Shouldn't you have returned to Satsuma?" Sen asked.

"Given the large number of patrols in the streets, something must have happened in the imperial palace, right?" Amagiri asked.

"Emperor Koumei's wife has become a widow." Kazama said.

"!" Sen gasped. How did heâ€¦!\_!\_?

"Was I right?" He asked, smirking to have had his suspicions confirmed so easily.

Nagumo Kaoru, who had been eavesdropping nearby, also smirked as he turned and quietly slipped away. He was leaping from branch to branch as he raced back through the tree tops.

\_SWISH.\_

"!" Kaoru said, quickly using the wrapped up katana he was carrying to thwart the stick someone had sent hurtling towards him. Kaoru's brow was furrowed as he landed on his feet on the ground below.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" Kazama inquired as he stepped into view.

"Simply to visit the imperial city." Kaoru replied calmly in a feminine voice as he straightened up.

"An oni who listens to outside conversations like a rat. A good hobby, is it not?" Kazama said mockingly as he narrowed his eyes slightly. Kaoru simply stared at him for a moment before turning to walk away.

"He was probably authorized by Tosa to pry into the movements in Kyoto." Amagiri said as he stepped forth to block him. "I heard you were here, but this is my first time meeting you." Amagiri said, bowing politely.

"Me too." Kaoru said, inclining his head slightly to the older oni before glancing at back at Kazama. "You've survived to this day by groveling at Satsuma's feet, haven't you? And Anyway, it seems I'm not the only one who eavesdropped on you." He added, glancing up at the tree above, where another oni was perched.

"Sorry, I happened to hear, too!" Shiranui called down at them.

"Shiranui Kyo." Amagiri said as they watched the gun-slinging oni hop down from the tree to join them.

"I had heard that there was movement in the capital, but I didn't expect to find someone like this." Shiranui remarked. "So, who are you?" He asked Kaoru.

"Forgive my late introduction. I am of Tosa." Kaoru said politely, bowing, as he greeted Shiranui. "My name is Nagumo Kaoru."

"Heh? Nagumo sent such a little guy to do this work?" Shiranui asked.

"Better call him a 'little girl'." Kazama said with the hint of a smirk. "You want to disguise yourself, don't you?" He asked Kaoru.

"My, my. Satsuma and Choshu are getting along so well even at a time like this." Kaoru commented. Kazama furrowed his brow slightly while Shiranui whistled in appreciation. "Incidentally, it seems the ruler of the Kazama clan has an interest within the Shinsengumi?" Kaoru asked, glancing up at Kazama.

"What of it?" Kazama asked.

"I'm telling you to keep your hands off Yukimura Chizuru, or else..." Kaoru said as he unwrapped the hilt of his sword, revealing that it was the katana that went with Chizuru's kodachi.

"\_!\_" Amagiri and Shiranui gasped in surprise.

"Hmph." Kazama said calmly. He wasn't surprised, given Nagumo Kaoru's striking resemblance to Chizuru. The two of them must be siblings, though from the tone of his voice, it didn't sound as if brotherly love was Kaoru's motivation for warning him off. "Maybe you want to

kill her?" Kazama asked.

"I, I have my own ideas and convictions." Kaoru said, allowing his voice to deepen, as he placed a hand over the hilt of his sword. "And I'll stop anyone who gets in my way, even you."

"What can you do except hide in the shadows?" Kazama asked. "You, a little hypocrite with nothing but lies, have no right to tell me what to do." Kaoru grit his teeth in anger as he drew his sword and slashed at Kazama, but the other oni dodged all of his attacks without even batting an eyelash before swiftly disappearing in a whirl of leaves. Kaoru turned and saw that Kazama was now standing calmly several feet short of a yard behind him. Shiranui's brow was slightly furrowed as he and Amagiri watched the pointless confrontation. Amagiri sighed.

"Are you running away?" Kaoru demanded challengingly, irritated when Kazama started to walk away with his back turned to him, as if he didn't see him as the slightest bit of a threat. Kazama paused. "Running to the Satsuma clan for refuge must be something you people are really proud of." Kaoru taunted. There was a dark and dangerous gleam in Kazama Chikage's crimson eyes as he slowly turned around to face him again.

"Bastard, you must really want to die." Kazama stated lowly, fixing the younger oni with a severe glare, as he prepared to draw his own blade.

"!" Kaoru said, taking a step back, after seeing the fierce look in his eye. Shiranui sighed. Really, this was starting to get out of hand. They all knew a fight between two pureblood oni was just a waste of time anyway.

"Oi, oi." Shiranui said as he walked over to Kaoru. "Let's finish this in a better way, huh?" He suggested, placing a hand on his shoulder. Kaoru's eyes met his own with a hateful glare, and Shiranui had only a split second to dodge the younger oni pivoted to turn his blade on him. If Shiranui had been a human, he would have been cleaved in half at the waist, but as an oni, he was too fast for that. Shiranui jumped up and flipped out of the way, landing well out the reach of Kaoru's blade, as he raised his gun and aimed it at his would-be attacker. Kaoru furrowed his brow as the three other oni stood together, glaring sternly at him with disapproval.

"Hmph. Guess the fun is over, then." Kaoru wisely conceded as he sheathed his sword, finally backing down now that he had managed to make them all his enemy. "But take my advice, and don't put a finger on Chizuru." He said, glaring at Kazama. "I won't show any mercy if you do." He added, disappearing with a gust of wind.

"Shall we follow him?" Amagiri asked Kazama.

"No matter, let him go." Kazama replied calmly. The fact that Nagumo Kaoru seriously thought he stood a chance against him seemed to have amused him somewhat. 'In any case, that brat will have to get through that Komainu firstâ€¦' He thought with a trace of a smile.

"Well, it's time for me to leave, too." Shiranui said, lowering his gun. "See you later he told his fellow oni with a wave before making himself scarce.

"Amagiri, watch her closely." Kazama ordered. "There will be a calamity sweeping through everything at the beginning of spring. When the confrontation begins, the future of this country will stagger. Our family should stay together. We need to be prepared to protect the whole clan from disaster."

"Understood." Amagiri replied dutifully.

"The Snow will probably melt soon." Kazama remarked as he stared off into the distance at the mountains cloaked in white. "But until the last moment, the marks stay on it." He wondered if it had snowed so early back in their home in the West as well. 'With the changing situation between oni and humans, what will you do, Yukimura Chizuru and Miyagawa Sumiko?'

## 32. A Knife in the Dark

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 32: A Knife in the Dark<strong>

\* \* \*

<p><strong>March, 1867<strong>

The sun was shining brightly. It was a beautiful spring day with clear skies, but there was an unseen darkness brewing on the horizon.

"Kazama and the others have returned to Kyoto?" Sen asked, furrowing her brow, when she heard Kimigiku's latest report. The kunoichi was kneeling respectfully before the younger girl.

"It seems the storm shall soon begin." Sen said gravely.

“^”

"Itou-san treated you to dinner!\_?" Sano said incredulously. He, Shinpachi, Okita, and the girls had been hanging out on some steps back at headquarters while watching Saitou practice his swordsmanship, when Shinpachi had suddenly dropped that bomb on them.

"Shh! You're way too loud, Sano." Shinpachi shushed him.

"He was trying to recruit you, wasn't he?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow and frowning worriedly.

"Yeah." Shinpachi said, only slightly surprised to hear that Sumiko had already figured out what was going on. "He was like, 'Aren't you dissatisfied with the Shinsengumi?' and 'If the Bakufu can't expel the foreigners, it's finished.' At the end of all that, he asked, 'Won't you come with me?'"

"What did you say?" Chizuru asked.

"I'd already had plenty to eat and drink, so I said, 'Bein' partners with you all wouldn't be any fun.'" Shimpachi replied with a smirk. Sumiko smiled.

"I wish I could've been there to see the look on Itou's face." She said.

"It was the same with you, Hajime-kun, right?" Okita said, glancing at Saito.

\_SLICE. SLICE.\_

Saito had cut the straw target he was practicing with in two places so swiftly, that it almost appeared as though both blows had been delivered simultaneously.

"Hai." Saitou said, sheathing his sword, as he turned around to face them.

“”

Later that day, as the sun was setting, Okita was on patrol with his squad and the two girls. "If the heads of the 2nd and 3rd divisions were entertained, why didn't he call for me, the head of the 1st?" He wondered out loud, still thinking about their conversation from earlier that afternoon.

'Isn't that because you'd kill him on sight if he did?' Sumiko thought, smiling wryly

"If he invited you, would you go with Itou-san?" Chizuru asked.

"Of course." Okita replied calmly.

"Huh? Okita-san!" Chizuru gasped, shocked.

"And maybe kill him." He added, glancing back at her with a smirk.

"I swear!" Chizuru said as she quickly hurried to catch up to them. "That doesn't sound like a joke!"

"That's because it wasn't!" Sumiko said, sweat-dropping, while Okita laughed. "Hm?" Sumiko said, pausing when she thought she sensed someone watching them.

"Koff! Koff!"

"!" Sumiko said as Chizuru gasped, and they rushed over to Okita as he covered his mouth and bent over when his latest coughing fit hit him.

Nagumo Kaoru smirked as he observed this from the shadows.

“”

Sumiko and Chizuru had been sleeping peacefully in their room that evening, when they were awoken by the sound of heavy footsteps on the

porch outside their room. They sat up in their futons and turned to see a dark silhouette just on the other side of their door. Sumiko furrowed her brow. Something wasn't right. There was an eerie feeling, like on the night when San'nan had drank the Ochimizuâ€|

"Who's there?" Chizuru asked nervously. Sumiko's eyes widened as the door slide open to reveal a white-haired man with glowing crimson eyes.

"Bloodâ€| blood!" He chanted to himself as he stared down at them with a crazed look in his eyes. "Give me your blood!" He cried as he stepped into the room.

"Look out!" Sumiko shouted as she moved to push Chizuru out the way when the bloodthirsty rasetsu reached down the draw his sword.

\_SLASH!\_

"Ah!" Chizuru cried out in alarm when the older girl threw herself at her just in time to push her back when the rasetsu attacked. She winced when she felt his blade cut into her arm as he swiped it at them, but she gasped in horror when she opened her eyes and saw that Sumiko had taken the brunt of the attack. "Sumiko-san!"

"Run, Chizuru!" Sumiko grunted in pain as she gripped the blade of the sword in her side with one hand to prevent the wound from deepening and clenched the other into a fist to punch the rasetsu in the face, sending the dangerous man stumbling backwards as he let go of his sword. "Nngh!" She groaned as she fell onto one knee, bracing herself.

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru screamed as the rasetsu started laughing, high on the scent of their blood.

"Blood! Blood!" He laughed gleefully, staggering towards them again. 'Give me your blood!"

\_SLICE!\_

"Yaaah!" The rasetsu cried out in pain when he was suddenly attacked from behind and fell face first to the floor, revealing their savior to be none other than Hijikata.

"Hijikata-san!" Chizuru gasped.

"Come with me. Hurry!" He urged the girls.

"Ah, Hai!" Chizuru said, letting go of her bleeding arm to help Sumiko up.

"!" Both girls gasped in alarm when the rasetsu reached out and grabbed her ankle as they tried to get away.

"Blood! Blood!" The rasetsu chanted, grinning manically up at them as the deep wound on his back closed.

"Tch!" Sumiko winced, pulling the sword from her side while Chizuru screamed, about to use it to remove his hand, but Sano's spear

pierced the rasetsu's wrist and pinned it to the floor, beating her to it.

"Gyaaah!" The rasetsu screamed in pain as he released her ankle.

"Chizuru! Sumiko! You okay!\_?" Heisuke shouted as he and the others arrived on the scene.

"H-Hai!" Chizuru replied nervously. "But Sumiko-sanâ€¦!"

"I'll be all rightâ€¦!" Sumiko said, gritting her teeth as she held her bleeding side and winced in pain. "Let's get out of here!"

"Blood!" The rasetsu cried as he picked himself up off the floor, determined to go after them. "Give me your blood!"

"Looks like he's in no condition to talk." Shinpachi said, noting the depraved look in the rasetsu's eyes. His bloodlust had completely taken over.

"!" Chizuru gasped when the rasetsu turned and focused his attention on her and Sumiko again.

"Give me your blood!" He roared, charging at them.

"Tch!" Hijikata furrowed his brow and glared sternly at the rasetsu as he stepped in front the girls to cut him down. While Hijikata attacked from the front, Sano struck from behind and stabbed the rasetsu through the heart with his spear, killing him. Sano swung his spear, sending the corpse crashing toward the doors to prevent it from collapsing on Hijikata and the girls. The limp body crashed into the doors, knocking them loose from their setting so that it was lying on top of them askance in the middle of the porch outside.

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru cried when the older girl's knees buckled, and they almost fell to the floor together.

"S-Sorry, Chizuruâ€¦ It looks like I'm loosing blood faster than I thought..." Sumiko said, breathing heavily, as she tried to stay focused while keeping a hand clamped to her side in a loosing attempt to apply enough pressure to stem the blood flowing from her open wound. Dark spots were starting to swim around in field of vision.

"Heisuke, get Yamazaki!" Hijikata ordered urgently upon realizing the severity of her wound.

"H-Hai!" Heisuke said, immediately running off to fetch the next skilled medic in the headquarters.

"What's heâ€¦ even doing here?" Sumiko asked weakly as she stared at the rasetsu's corpse. Why did he come looking for blood in the main part of the compound? Was the medicine she had made to prevent this not good enoughâ€¦?

"My lack of supervision is to blame." San'nan apologized grimly as he approached them.



"San'nan-kun. What's the meaning of this?" Kondo asked.

"I don't know what happened either." San'nan said as he stared down regretfully at the dead man.

"Miyagawa-san, are you all right?" San'nan asked, concerned, as he entered the room and knelt down beside the two girls, noticing right away the serious condition the older girl was in. "Miyagawa-san?" He asked, reaching out to touch her when she didn't respond.

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru gasped in alarm when she realized her friend was leaning on her because she had passed out.

"Oi, Sumiko!" Shinpachi yelled.

"All this blood!" San'nan said quietly, furrowing his brow, as he touched her wound, and his hand became soaked in Sumiko's blood.

\_TH-THUMP.\_

"!" San'nan gasped. His eyes widened when something inside him began to break under the combined weight of the scent of both girls' blood and the sensation of the warm crimson liquid on his hand.

"San'nan-san?" Chizuru asked, concerned when he started to tremble while staring at the palm of his blood-soaked hand.

"Dyaaaaah!" San'nan cried out as he began shaking violently while holding his head.

"San'nan-san!" Sano said as they all stared at him. Hijikata's eyes widened in realization.

"What's the matter?" Chizuru asked worriedly.

"Get back, Chizuru!" Hijikata shouted as he quickly grabbed both girls and pushed them out of harm's way as San'nan finally snapped completely.

"Aaaarghhh!" San'nan cried out in like a tormented soul as he reared back and his dark hair faded to white.

"San'nan-san!" Chizuru cried.

"Blood! I!" San'nan gasped, taking a step toward the three of them as he stared at the girls with glowing red eyes. "I want blood. Blood! Agh!" He groaned in pain as he grasped his throat.

"Dammit!" Shinpachi cursed as he watch their friend succumb to his bloodlust. "The smell of blood has gotten to San'nan-san, too?"

"Ah-haha." San'nan laughed as he stared down at his bloodstained hand. They all watched, horrified, as he licked it, savoring the taste of Sumiko's blood. "Your blood!" San'nan said, grinning wickedly as he reached out for the unconscious Sumiko in Hijikata's

arms. "I want your blood!" Saito quickly dashed into the room to Back Hijikata up, guarding him, as he tried to shield Chizuru while carrying Sumiko. The four of them tried to evade San'nan by quickly moving to the side, but he simply turned and followed them, determined to get more of the blood he had just tasted.

"Guess we've got no choice, huh?" Shinpachi said regretfully as he drew his sword.

"Dammit!" Sano cursed as he readied his spear, and Saito prepared to draw his own blade. "We'll take him all at once." He said grimly.

"Wait!" Hijikata said when San'nan suddenly froze and started to tremble.

"Guh! Guhaaah!" San'nan yelled as he cradled his head and fell to his knees on the floor. "Nngh!" They watched with bated breath, stunned, as San'nan's white hair faded back to its original dark color, and as he raised his head again, they could see his eyes had returned to normal as well. They all stared at him in astonishment and relief to see that he had somehow managed to repress his bloodlust and return to normal, something that was thought to have been impossible.

"San'nan-san!" Chizuru exclaimed.

"Yukimura-kun. Just what did Iâ€|?" San'nan said, looking up at her before glancing around the room in confusion. "!" He gasped when his eyes landed on the body of the dead rasetsu. "I see." He said, furrowing his brow. "Like him, Iâ€|" But then, how did he manage to regain his sensesâ€|?

"Just what is all this racket!\_?" The voice of the person they least wanted to hear at the moment demanded fussily as they all turned to see Itou standing out on the porch, staring down at the dead rasetsu, while he raised his kimono sleeve to cover his mouth. "Someone explain it to me! Hah!" He gasped, startled when he looked into the room and saw the bleeding girls and San'nan. "S-San'nan-san! Y-You should be d-dead! Whyâ€|\_!" He exclaimed shakily, looking as though he had seen a ghost.

"Come, calm yourself, Itou-san." Kondo said, stepping forward to handle the situation. "We'll talk tomorrow. It's already late." He said gently, guiding the panicking man back to his room.

"H-How could I possibly be calm!\_?" Itou exclaimed incredulously as he allowed himself to be herded away from the bizarre scene. "You need to explain this to me!"

"Looks like we're busted. Should I kill him?" Okita asked calmly, glancing at Hijikata.

Hijikata furrowed his brow but didn't reply. What was taking Yamazaki and Heisuke so long?

"Use my room for tonight." He told Chizuru. "We'll bring Sumiko-san there once she's received treatment and have Yamazaki look at your wound."

"I'm all right." Chizuru said, avoiding his gaze, as she held a hand over the cut on her arm.

"There's no way you're all right!" Hijikata said, concerned. The cut on her arm may not be as grave as Sumiko's wound, but it still looked painful and deep. "Sumiko-san may not be in any condition to treat you herself, but Yamazaki-san is our resident medicâ€" "

"I'm fine! I can treat my own wounds." Chizuru insisted, starting to panic. "Please have Yamazaki-san focus on taking care of Sumiko-san." She said quickly, bowing, before hurrying off to the privacy of Hijikata's room so they wouldn't see how abnormally fast her own wound was healing. She bit her lip, saying a silent prayer for Sumiko as she entrusted Yamazaki with her friend's wellbeing.

### 33. Revelations

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 33: Revelations<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>The next morning, Chizuru woke up to find that Sumiko was still sound asleep. Her normally peaceful sleeping face looked tired and pale. Yamazaki had managed to stop the bleeding, but not before she had lost a terrifying amount of blood. Thankfully, Sumiko's life didn't seem to be in any immediate danger despite the severity of her wound, but it was still unsettling to see the strong girl looking so weak and fragile. Chizuru very quietly sat up in her futon, careful not to wake her sleeping friend, and unwrapped the bandages on her arm to check on her own wound. It didn't hurt anymore, and you could barely even tell the deep cut had ever been there. All that remained now was a thin, pink line of freshly formed skin. She didn't want to wake Sumiko since the older girl obviously still needed to rest in order to recover her strength, so she carefully set about the task of re-bandaging her arm and putting it into a sling to disguise the fact that it had already healed.<p>

â€"â^žâ€"

"Good mornâ€" " Chizuru started to greet the others as she walked over to the well to wash her face and clean her teeth for the day with them, when Shinpachi abruptly and angrily yelled:

"Give me a break!" Chizuru paused, startled, but then she quickly realized that he hadn't actually been talking to her. "How could we forgive such selfishness\_!\_?" He asked the others, throwing down his towel.

"Right on the heels of yesterdayâ€| He sure does move fast, that tanuki." Sano said, referring to Itou.

"Has something happened?" Chizuru asked as she stepped up to join them.

"Itou-san has announced he's leaving the troop." Inoue replied while

cleaning his teeth.

"Itou-san?" Chizuru asked.

Â«Â« Flashback Â«Â«

\_"A guardian of the imperial tomb?" Kondo asked.\_

\_"Indeed." Itou replied calmly as he sat across from Kondo and Hijikata. "Upon departing, I, Itou, shall assume guard of Emperor Koumei's tomb, along with my men, of course."\_

\_"But, Itou-san, we can't simply allow you to resign." Kondo said reasonably. Normally such a thing would be unheard of according their group's rules.\_

\_"Are you saying I should stay, after that display of just last evening?" Itou asked, knowing he was putting them in a tight spot.\_

\_"Yes, well, about thatâ€|" Kondo said hesitantly.\_

\_"What's more, to think that San'nan-san is alive, after I'd been told he was deadâ€|" If I am an officer, what is the meaning of my not having been informed of this?" Itou said pointedly.\_

\_"All responsibility for this falls to me." Kondo said solemnly. Any further explanation would require revealing the existence of the Ochimizu. \_

\_"It seems other things have been kept secret as well." Itou added slyly, glancing at Hijikata. "When there are secrets among the top leaders, it has an effect on the morale of all."\_

\_"Your logic is sound." Hijikata said, glancing up at him. "Put simply, you're saying to split up the group, yes?" He asked, furrowing his brow.\_

\_"This isn't 'splitting up' by any stretch." Itou said with a laugh. "It's a constructive division of forces. I'll keep these secrets to myself, just as you'll keep the details of my leave to yourselves, yes?" He asked slyly.\_

\_"Well, if you're that adamant about it, it can't be helped." Kondo said somberly. It was a shame this outcome couldn't have been avoided. Hijikata got up and crossed to room, placing his hand on the door.\_

\_"You'll have no regrets, will you?" He asked, sliding it open to reveal Heisuke and Saito waiting to leave with Itou.\_

Â«Â« End Flashback Â«Â«

"Heisuke-kun and Saito-san?" Chizuru asked, taken aback after Inoue had finished recounting what had transpired.

"Yes. It seems they'll be going with Itou-san." Inoue said regretfully. "It's a shock."

"No wayâ€|" Chizuru said sadly, stricken by the news.

"Heisuke, that bastard! He didn't even come to us for a word of advice!" Shinpachi said bitterly, feeling betrayed. "Dammit! This ain't funny!" He said angrily as he grabbed his towel and stomped off.

“”

"How many times has it been, that the cherry blossoms of Kyoto have fallen like so?" Saito mused aloud while he stood under a large cherry tree and watched as the fragrant petals floated on the wind like a gentle pink snow.

"Saito-san”|" Chizuru said when she found him there.

"Time passes, and many things change." He said as he continued to stare up at the blooming cherry blossoms while a gentle breeze ruffled his hair. "The workings of the world, ideologies, and also the Shinsengumi."

"You're going to leave us because it's changed?" Chizuru asked sadly.

"And yet, it's not as if all things change." Saito added. "It is those unchanging things in which I believe."

"Unchanging things”|" Chizuru repeated softly as she watched him walk away.

Chizuru was walking back to check on Sumiko when she spotted Heisuke sitting on a bench beneath another cherry tree, staring listlessly up at the sky as it rained pink petals. He turned his head and looked at her when caught movement out the corner of his eye, giving her a placid smile, as she came over and quietly took a seat beside him.

"I don't think Itou-san is completely wrong, like everyone says he is." Heisuke told her as he began explaining his reasons for leaving. "Imperial nationalism or adherence to the shogunate: I don't think you can know which is right until you try for yourself. Plus, I was the one who invited Itou-san in the first place. I can't word it well, but I want to see what is needed for the sake of this country. That's why I'm going with Itou-san."

"Heisuke-kun”|" Chizuru said.

"But I want you to understand something." He said. "It's not like I've come to hate the others. If I said I'm not sad to be leaving you, that would be a lie."

"Well, then”| is this place no good?" Chizuru asked. "You should be able to learn what's best for this world right here."

"You may be right, but”| I've already decided to go." Heisuke said resolutely. "Even I am”| I'm a man, too."

Chizuru stared at him for a moment before looking down sadly.

"I'm sorry." He told her. "I wasn't able to stay with you till you found your dad." And he also had to leave while Sumiko was still in

that condition, too" |

"It's all right" | Chizuru said quietly.

"Take care of yourself, Chizuru."

"You too, Heisuke-kun."

March 20, 1867. Itou-san led a band of thirteen men, plus Heisuke-kun and Saito-san, and left the Shinsengumi headquarters. The cherry blossoms fell, and the season leaned toward the beginnings of summer.

"^"

It was quiet that evening during dinner. Sumiko had regained consciousness, but she had orders to remain in bed, so she was eating in Hijikata's room, where the girls were staying until the doors for their room could be fixed. Between her condition and the departure of Heisuke and Saito, they had a lot on their minds. The only sound in the room aside from the clicking of chopsticks against plates while they ate was Shinpachi's constant grumbling about Heisuke while he furiously stuffed his face.

"Don't worry, you're of the same 'expel all foreigners' ideology. You'll meet again." Kondo said, trying to reassure them.

SLIDE.

They all glanced up when the door opened.

"Commander. A female visitor is here." Shimada announced.

"A female visitor?" Kondo asked, surprised.

"She said she's come to see Yukimura-kun and Miyagawa-san, but also wants to meet with you and the others." Shimada said. They all glanced at Chizuru.

"Me and Sumiko-san?" She asked, wondering who it could possibly be.

"^"

"Osen-chan!" Chizuru said, surprised to see who their visitor was after they had all gathered in Hijikata's room to receive her so Sumiko could be present, too.

"Hey, long time no see." Sumiko said, smiling wryly, as she wondered why Kimigiku, who happened to be accompanying her, was dressed like a kunoichi.

"I've come for you, Chizuru-chan, Sumiko-san." Sen said seriously.

"Eh?" Sumiko said.

"What do you mean?" Chizuru asked.

"There's no more time." Kimigiku told them. "Please prepare to leave here at once." Chizuru and Sumiko blinked as they stared at their fellow female oni in surprise.

"You can't just say something like that!" Chizuru said.

"Yeah, it's too sudden. What's this all about?" Sumiko asked.

"That's right." Shinpachi said. "Can't you explain it so \_we\_ can understand too?"

"You know of Kazama Chikage, don't you?" Sen asked the men.

"Kazama?" Chizuru asked.

"Not him again!" Sumiko said as she furrowed her brow, chagrined.

"That ally of Satsuma, right?" Sano asked.

"He and his pals Amagiri and Shiranui have gone up against us several times." Shinpachi said.

"And you know they're after these girls?" Sen asked.

"We're aware of it." Kondo replied. "Apparently, they refer to themselves as oni."

"They're certainly incredibly skilled," Shinpachi said, "but 'oni' is kinda!"

"I, too, am an Oni." Sen stated confidently, surprising the men.

"This is Sen-hime, descendent of Suzuka Gozen of the ancient Oni bloodline." Kimigiku elaborated. "And I am Sen-hime's shinobi, of a line that has served her family for generations."

"Huh? Come to think of it, you were at Shimabara." Sano said, finally recognizing her.

"Ah, Kimigiku-san!" Shinpachi said.

"Eh? You mean you all only just now realized that?" Sumiko asked, sweat-dropping.

"Now I get it." Hijikata said. "I thought you were overly friendly, but your goal was Shinsengumi information." Kimigiku let out a quiet laugh and smirked like a fox.

"Since antiquity, those in power have come after us in hopes of gaining our powers for their own purposes." Sen said, getting back on topic.

"Generally speaking, the Oni clans dislike fighting and getting involved in human wars." Kimigiku added. "In the end, we all went our own ways and began living in hiding."

"After mingling with the humans for so long, only a few pureblooded Oni remain." Sen finished.

"Such as you and Kazama, you mean?" Kondo asked.

"Yes. Kazama has the strongest blood in the west. Largest Oni family in the east was the Yukimura family.

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped. So that's why Kazama kept emphasizing the importance of her family nameâ€|

"I'd heard that the Yukimura family had been destroyed, butâ€|" Sen said, glancing back at Chizuru.

'Destroyedâ€|?' Sumiko thought, furrowing her brow. How? And whyâ€|?

"H-Hang on second!" Sano said. "So, you're saying what? That Chizuru's an oni!\_?" Sen glanced at Chizuru, wondering how they could convince them of the truth.

"It seems you've perhaps thought of somethingâ€|" Sen said, noting the thoughtful expression on Chizuru's face. Chizuru slowly slid up the sleeve of her kimono, showing the others how any signs of the deep cut she had received the other night had already disappeared completely. The men all stared at her, stunned.

"Your wound! But it looked so deepâ€|" Shinpachi said.

"It's becauseâ€| I'm an oni." Chizuru said quietly, unable to look them in the eye after having hid it from them for so long.

"Incidentally, I've been told that I'm also supposed to be part oni." Sumiko added with a sigh. "That's probably why I heal abnormally fast, too. Though it's nowhere near the same rate as Chizuru'sâ€|"

"I seeâ€|!" San'nan thought as he stared at her. 'Her blood is the reason I regained my senses that night.'

"If those with strong or pure bloodlines breed, they can give birth to an even stronger Oni." Sen said.

"So that's what Kazama's after." Hijikata said.

"Yes. If Kazama were to go all out against you, you'd be helpless to stop him. Especially with Sumiko-san injured like this." Sen replied gravely.

"Say, Senhime-san, ain't 'helpless' goin' a little too far?" Shinpachi asked, chagrined.

"We are the Shinsengumi, called the Wolves of Mibu. Going up against an oni or two gives us no pause at all." Hijikata stated.

"You should be well aware of Kazama's strength." Kimigiku said. "We, however, may be able to protect these girls if they're with us."



"That implies you may \_not\_ be able to protect them." Hijikata said shrewdly.

"!" Sen and Kimigiku said, taken aback.

"Yukimura-kun, Miyagawa-san, what about you?" Kondo asked.

"Huh?" Chizuru asked.

"You should decide for yourselves whether you want to leave with them or stay here with us." Kondo said.

"Kondo-san, that ain't right!" Shinpachi protested. The girls would obviously be safer staying with them. They barely even knew Sen and Kimigiku.

"Be quiet, Shinpachi." Hijikata said. He felt the same, but this was a choice the girls had to make for themselves.

Chizuru glanced questioningly at Sumiko, wondering what she wanted to do.

"I'll go along with whatever you want." Sumiko told her. "After all, you're the one who has the most to lose. You're Kazama's main target. I'm just an afterthought. But don't worry, whatever happens, I won't leave you alone. Where you go, I go." She said, smiling reassuringly at her nervous friend.

"Iâ€|" Chizuru said hesitantly, clenching her fists as she stared down at her lap. She lifted her head and glanced around the room at the faces of all the others. Her eyes landed on Hijikata. "I want to stay here." She said determinedly.

"Chizuru-chanâ€|" Sen said, surprised. Sumiko just smiled and nodded, as though this had been the outcome she had expected all along.

â€"â^žâ€"

"I'm sorry, Osen-chan." Chizuru said as she saw Sen and Kimigiku off at the gate.

"Chizuru-chan, could it be there's some reason that you don't want to leave here?" Sen asked.

"Huh?"

"There's someone here you fancy, for example?" Sen asked, smiling.

"U-Um, wellâ€|" Chizuru said, blushing slightly.

"Hime-sama, is this really all right?" Kimigiku asked.

"Mn." Sen said, nodding, before turning back to her friend. "Chizuru-chan, don't forget. I'm your ally, all right?"

"Thank you." Chizuru said, smiling softly.

## 34. Wake of the Slaughter

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 34: Wake of the Slaughter<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Guard of the Imperial Tomb  
Headquarters<strong>

"Congratulations on your guard of the Imperial Tomb." Kondo told Itou. He had come to officially greet Itou and his group after they acquired their own separate headquarters at another temple. Okita and Inoue were there as his guard.

"Thank you very much." Itou said calmly.

Okita, who was sitting at attention with Inoue, began coughing again. His 'attacks' were coming more and more frequently.

â€"â^žâ€"

\*\*Shinsengumi Headquarters\*\*

"Are you sure you're all right to work, Sumiko-san?" Chizuru asked while she swept the walkway together, concerned. "Your wound only just finished closingâ€|"

"Yeah, I'm totally fine." Sumiko said, smiling as she waved her friend's worries off. "Don't worry, Chizuru. I'm just happy to be back on my feet again." And it was a relief that Kazama and the others hadn't tried to come while she was still bedridden. Despite the urgent warning they had from Sen and Kimigiku that he would be coming for Chizuru soon, he seemed to be taking his sweet time getting thereâ€| Not that that was a bad thing. It would be even better if he never came at all.

â€"â^žâ€"

Their period of grace seemed to be over, however, as that very evening, when the moon was high in the sky, the gang of Oni attacked.

\_BANG! BANG!\_

The two guards at the gate were each taken out by a bullet to the head as the great gates to the temple were forced open with a loud crash, kicking up a huge gust of wind and dust. Kazama stepped forward, leading Amagiri and Shiranui into the Shinsengumi Headquarters.

"Yaaah!" More Shinsengumi members came charging with their swords drawn, but Amagiri effortlessly repelled and disabled them using only his bare hands.

"No challenge at all, huh?" Shiranui commented. It was kind of

pathetic, like picking on the weakâ€|

However, the men Amagiri had just taken out, as well as the men Shiranui had shot, suddenly picked themselves back up off the ground. As the men turned to face the three oni, their hair faded white and their eyes glowed red in the dark.

"What are these guys?" Shiranui asked. There was no way they were normal humans.

"My apologies for the wait." San'nan said as he came out to greet them with more men. He and all the newcomers also had white hair and red eyes after activating the powers given to them by the Ochimizu. "We of the Rasetsu Unit shall be the opponents of you oni."

"It would seem they are the result of their research." Amagiri remarked.

"Ah. Those imitations, huh?" Shiranui said.

"Come! Unleash all your power!" San'nan commanded his fellow rasetsus. The rasetsus all cheered and yelled as they charged at the oni without hesitation, eager to finally be allowed to participate in a battle in where there was no need to hold back. They could finally go wild.

â€"â^žâ€"

\_BANG!\_

"!" Chizuru gasped as she shot up in bed, instantly on alert after being awoken by the sound of gunfire and the men's battle cries."What's that!\_?"

"We're being attacked." Sumiko said as she finished tying her hakama and grabbed her sword. She had been awoken by an uneasy feeling only moments before the commotion began outside.

"Eh? Sumiko-sanâ€|" Chizuru said, furrowing her brow in concern, as she watched her friend head for the door. "You aren't planning to fight, are you? Your woundâ€"

"Will be fine as long as I avoid taking a direct hit." Sumiko finished for her. "Don't worry. I'm just going to take a look, but it never hurts to be prepared, right?" She said, flashing Chizuru a reassuring smile before slipping out of the room. She wanted to be ready to help the others if the shit hit the fan.

â€"â^žâ€"

No matter how hard the oni hit and beat the rasetsus, they just kept getting up and coming back for more. It was beginning to become a real nuisance. Simply disabling them was out of the question. They healed too quickly for that. Nothing short of death could stop the rasetsus.

"Rraah!" One of them roared as he charged at Kazama with his sword raised. Kazama quickly dodged the rash attack with ease and grabbed hold of the hilt of the short sword still sheathed at the rasetsu's waist. In one swift motion, he drew the word and used it to stab its

owner through the heart. The rasetsu cried out in pain before falling lifelessly to the ground.

"If you hit them in their vital spot, they're done for." Kazama advised his fellow oni as he continued to fight swiftly and efficiently, using the short sword to stab any and all who came at him through the heart with one quick thrust.

"I swear! It's horrible that they were ever even created!" Amagiri said, furrowing his brow, as he continued to fight with his fists. So much for the plan to simply render all who opposed them unconscious.

"Sure enough, true oni are ferocious indeed." San'nan said, drawing his sword to join the fray as the oni began to slaughter his men.

"I'll leave this to you." Kazama told the others when he spotted Sumiko headed their way with Hijikata, Sano, and Shinpachi, leaving to find Chizuru. If the Komainu was there, then Yukimura Chizuru would be easy to snatch away with only mere humans left to guard her. And once they had Yukimura Chizuru, her loyal guardian would undoubtedly follow. Two birds with one stone.

"Tch. Guess we've got no choice." Shiranui said, clicking his tongue in annoyance as he stayed behind with Amagiri. They just kept coming, didn't they?

“あゝ”

As soon as she finished getting dressed, Chizuru left their room and started running to join the others in the fight.

"Yukimura-kun!" Shimada, who was supposed to be guarding and protecting her, shouted in alarm, chasing after her. "You mustn't!" he said urgently, cutting her off before she could get any closer to the danger. "The Vice-commander ordered me to keep you safe."

"They're after \_me\_! I can't just hide while everyone's fighting!" Chizuru said anxiously. "Sumiko-san's only just recovered from this!" She and Shimada gasped, startled, when Kazama walked up.

"I've come for you." Kazama said.

"Get back, Yukimura-kun!" Shimada said as he stepped forth to protect her and drew his sword. "Yaaah!" He shouted, charging at Kazama in earnest. He swung his sword at the oni using both hands, but Kazama simply raised the short sword in his one and blocked the heavy-handed blow effortlessly.

"Hmph." Kazama sent Shimada crashing into the porch railing with a well-placed kick to the torso.

"!" Shimada grunted in pain from the rough landing as he hit his head and blacked out.

"Shimada-san!" Chizuru cried in alarm, rushing to the fallen man's side. "Please, stop this!" She said urgently, turning to face Kazama as he approached her. "Don't hurt any!" "Ah! Ungh!" Chizuru gasped, startled when he reached out and grabbed her, turning her as he held

her back against him so he could deliver a sharp blow to her diaphragm with the but of his sword to knock her out.

“あゝ”

"Ungh!" Sumiko grunted in pain, coughing, as she slid back from the force of the blow Amagiri had just delivered to her gut.

"Sumiko!" Shinpachi shouted in alarm when she fell to one knee, leaning on her sword for support.

"I'mâ€"koffâ€"fine!" She shouted back, gritting her teeth. "Just don't let him hit you!" She was surprised the force of his attack hadn't broken a rib or two. It probably would have if she were a normal human.

"Oh, was I too rough?" Amagiri asked. "Pardon me. I sometimes forget you are only half oni." He said, moving to take a step closer to her. There was a small trickle of blood forming at the corner of her mouth. He must have aggravated a hidden wound she obtained in a previous fightâ€|

"Hnh!" Shinpachi grunted, swinging his sword at the oni with all his might to make him back off as he and Hijikata rushed over to back her up. Amagiri elbowed Shinpachi in the side, adjusting his strength to match his human opponent, before having to quickly avoid a sharp thrust from Hijikata's blade. Hijikata unleashed a series of successive attacks, forcing Amagiri away from the others as the oni continued to dodge.

"San'nan-san, I'll deal with this guy!" Sano said as he thrust his spear at Shiranui.

"Don't get cocky!" Shiranui retorted as he dodged. He jumped away when Sano took another swipe at him, raising his gun as he landed well beyond the reach of the other man's spear.

\_BANG! BANG!\_

He smirked as Sano charged at him, heedless of the bullets whizzing past his face. This human really had guts!

Sumiko was struggling to get back on her feet, after having ripped the sleeve of her kimono and using it to bind her semi-reopened wound, when she noticed another figure approaching.

"!" She gasped when she realized it was Kazama, and he already had an unconscious Chizuru slung over his shoulder. She furrowed her brow. So, that's where he had beenâ€| she should've known! "Chizuru!"

"!" The men gasped when they looked over and saw what she was staring at.

"Let Chizuru go!" Shinpachi shouted sternly as the fighting came to a standstill with everyone's attention focused on Kazama and the unconscious Chizuru. He was surprised the komainu didn't immediately come rushing over to help her friend, but one look at Sumiko told him that what he had heard Chizuru mention about her having only just 'recovered' was true. Amagiri would never have injured a female like

that on purpose. She must have sustained an injury after getting dragged into some nonsense because of these humans againâ€¦

"Care to take her back by force?" Kazama asked when he noticed the fierce expression on Hijikata's face, setting Chizuru down for a moment.

"Interesting." Hijikata said, smirking darkly, as he stepped up to face the oni with his sword drawn. "You've trespassed into the Shinsengumi's headquarters. We won't allow any more selfish behavior!" He shouted sternly as he charged at Kazama.

"Yaah!" Sumiko yelled as she grit her teeth and threw herself into helping Shinpachi take on Amagiri again. Amagiri was surprised by how fierce they had all suddenly become, as if their determination to protect Yukimura Chizuru had become strengthened by her mere presence.

"What's the matter?" Sano asked Shiranui tauntingly as he continued to attack with his spear. "You're backing up!" Shiranui grit his teeth as he dodged another thrust of Sano's spear.

"Che!"

\_CLANG!\_

"That woman's value lies in the fact that I shall use her." Kazama told the vice-commander as he locked swords with him.

"You can finish telling that story to the damned in hell!" Hijikata said fiercely. No way in hell was he handing Chizuru over to this bastard!

"!" Chizuru gasped when she opened her eyes and saw Hijikata fighting Kazama for her. "Hijikata-san!"

"So, you're awake?" Kazama said, glancing at her out the corner of his eye.

"Keh!" Hijikata grit his teeth and let out a roar of a war cry as he pressed his blade harder and struck Kazama's sword with enough force to break the blade.

"Hoh?" Kazama said as he examined the broken blade, somewhat impressed. Not bad, for a human. Perhaps it was time he got serious? Kazama placed a second hand on the hilt of his sword as he charged at Hijikata.

"!" Hijikata said as he just barely managed to dodge Kazama's swift attack. He raised his sword to try to block the next, but the force from Kazama's blow sent Hijikata's sword flying from his hands. Hijikata grit his teeth and glared as he slid back, and Kazama shot forward to charge at him again.

"Stop it!" Chizuru yelled as she ran into the fight with her kodachi drawn, placing herself protectively in front of Hijikata.

"!" Sumiko gasped when she whipped her head around and saw what was happening. She tried to run over to help them, but was cut off by

Amagiri.

"You mustn't do this!" Hijikata scolded Chizuru sternly as he placed his own hand on her sword and pulled her into a protective embrace.

Kazama froze in place with his sword raised over his head, poised to strike, as he stared down at them, taking in the intense emotions that were being expressed so clearly on their faces as they stood against him together.

"Why do you side with the humans?" He asked, furrowing his brow. "In the end, they will only betray you. You've seen those fake oni they've created, haven't you? What merit is there in siding with fools who would make things like those?"

"Even so, I believe in them!" Chizuru said earnestly.

Kazama stared down at her and Hijikata for a moment longer before finally lowering his sword and backing off. The komainu had mentioned something before about Yukimura Chizuru already being in love. Obviously it was with this man.

Shiranui laughed while he watched Kazama sheath his sword.

"Kazama, she turned you down big time, huh?" He asked, smirking.

"I've lost interest in this. Let's go." Kazama said calmly as he turned and headed for the gates. "But if you can't take better care of them in the future, I won't let you keep them." He added, narrowing his eyes slightly, as he passed Shinpachi and Sumiko, eyeing the reopened wound in her side.

Amagiri bowed politely to his two opponents and left with Kazama.

"Later, Harada! I'll kill you next time." Shiranui said, smirking, as he turned and hurried off to follow after his fellow oni. "Keep that neck of yours clean and wait for me!"

"Right back at you." Sano said. Sumiko let out a sigh of relief once they had disappeared into the mists beyond the gate and leaned on her sword.

"Check on the wounded." Hijikata ordered immediately.

"Right!" Shinpachi said.

"Understood." San'nan said, taking the other side of the yard.

"Chizuru!" Sumiko gasped as Sano came over to lend her an arm for support, concerned when the younger girl's knees buckled. "Are you all right?" She asked Chizuru as they went over to check on her.

"Sumiko-san, Harada-san," Chizuru said they both kneeled down in front of her.

"You did good back there." Sano said, gently placing a hand on top of her head.

"Iâ€| " Chizuru said shakily. "For my sake, everyoneâ€| " "

"Don't make that face." Sumiko said, smiling wanly.

"That's right. It's only right that a man protects a woman, Chizuru." Sano said, smiling kindly at her. "It's because you were here that we were many times more powerful than usual. Hijikata-san and Shinpachi, tooâ€| " He added, glancing over at the other men. Chizuru glanced up and saw that they were both watching from the side while Sano and Sumiko tried to comfort her.

"Sumiko-sanâ€| Harada-sanâ€| Everyoneâ€| Thank you very much." Chizuru said as tears began to well up in her eyes. Hijikata smiled slightly as he turned and walked away.

"Looks like Hijikata-san's proud of you, too." Sumiko said, smiling gently at her friend.

"Hai!" Chizuru softly as a light blush dusted her cheeks and she smiled slightly despite the tears in her eyes.

### 35. The Calm Before The Storm

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 35: The Calm Before the Storm<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>November, 1867<strong>

Chizuru and Sumiko were sweeping the leaves away out in front of the entrance to the Fudodo Village headquarters, the place where the Shinsengumi had moved after the big confrontation with the oni a couple months ago.

"Chizuru. Sumiko. You gotten used to it here yet?" Sano asked when he and his men returned from patrol.

"Hai." Chizuru said, smiling. "It really is a wonderful headquarters, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's a bit smaller, but that just means there's less to clean." Sumiko added with a slight smirk. They didn't need as much space anyway with Itou's group gone.

"Well, the monks at the Nishi Hongwanji Temple got this mansion for us." Sano said, smilingly wryly. "I bet they're glad to be rid of us. Having us around made things more noisy."

"We were even attacked by the oni thereâ€| " Chizuru said.

"Heh. A group of oni attacking a templeâ€| It sounds so surreal, like something out of an old legend." Sumiko said, shaking her head.



"Where's Abe no Seimei when you need him?"

"Yeah." Sano agreed. That was one thing they hadn't tried yet. "But thanks to all that, we got this sweet mansion. Guess we should be grateful to those oni." The two girls smiled wryly as a cold wind blew. Sumiko shivered when it hit the back of her neck and tucked her hands into her sleeves, while Chizuru exhaled on hers, trying to warm them with her breath.

"Cold?" Sano asked. "Would you like me warm your hands?" He asked, holding his own out to them.

"N-No. I can handle this amount of cold on my own." Chizuru said. Sumiko smiled wryly, knowing she was just shy about holding a guy's hand. That was pretty forward for back in the day, after all, though she was pretty sure Sano hadn't meant it that way.

"Sano." Shinpachi said, alerting them to his presence. They could hear the smirk in his voice. "What're you makin' a move on them in place like \_this\_ for?" He teased.

"Stupid! Don't equate me to you!" Sano retorted, rounding on him. "What I feel is pure affection."

"What're you callin' 'pure' affection?" Shinpachi asked tauntingly with a stupid grin on his face. "You know what you are? A big sourpuss! You should be more like me, go right in for the kill!"

The two girls smiled wryly and laughed at their antics, but then a more solemn expression came over them when they thought of what Heisuke might have said if he were still there.

'Until recently, Heisuke-kun would've been out here with us, too, huh?' Sumiko thought as she looked up at the grey and overcast late autumn sky. Her expression mirrored the somber mood of the sky above. '\_It\_' will be happening soon, won't it?

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**\*\*The Kodai-ji Temple,  
>Headquarters of the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb<strong>**

"They're restoring Imperial rule? Damn those sneaky Bakufu bastards!" Shinohara exclaimed, banging his fist against the table he was seated at across from Itou. Neither of the two men were aware that Saitou, who was in the hall just outside the room they were in, had stopped to listen in on their conversation.

"With this, Satsuma and Choshu are no longer charged with overthrowing the government, yes?" Itou said.

"Was this Sakamoto's doing? Who's side is he on!?! He's a naïve nationalist that wants to change the country without spilling any blood!" Shinohara said hotly.

"A sword that's too clean can prove dangerous, can't it?" Itou said thoughtfully. "As with Sakamoto and the Shinsengumi."

~~~~~

Saito had left and was on his way to pay a visit to a shrine, when he passed a man dressed in worn and ragged clothes who was sitting on the side of the road with a beggar's cup. Saito paused and reached into the sleeve of his kimono. He removed a couple of yen wrapped in a twisted sheet of paper and dropped it in the cup before continuing on his way.

"Thank you kindly." Yamazaki said in a raspy voice as he lifted his head, tucking the secret note safely into the worn-out kimono he was wearing for his disguise.

â€"â^žâ€"

**\*\*Shinsengumi Headquarters\*\***

Chizuru was washing some rags by the well, while Sumiko was off wiping the porches, when she began to feel as though she was being watched. She looked up and turned around to find Yamazaki standing there, as if he had been waiting for her to notice him.

"I'd like to speak with you." He said.

"Okayâ€|" Chizuru said, blinking, wondering what he could want.

Yamazaki led her to a private room where they could talk and very carefully made sure no one was around to eavesdrop before closing the doors.

"Even amongst the officers, only a handful of people know about this," Yamazaki said as he took a seat across from her, "but Okita-san has contracted a certain illness. You know about it, don't you?" He asked sternly.

"No, I don't." Chizuru lied solemnly, remembering the promise she had made with Okita never to talk about it to anyone else.

"Really?" Yamazaki asked.

"Hai." She replied quietly.

"You seem to be someone who can be trusted." Yamazaki said as his expression lightened, surprising her. "I'd like to ask a favor of you. If something were to happen to me, please look after Okita-san in my stead."

"If something were toâ€|" just what does that mean?" Chizuru asked, concerned.

"You're the only one I can ask." Yamazaki said. "Aside from Miyagawa-san, you're the only one who has any understanding of medicine and knows of his illness. I know Miyagawa-san is aware of this secret as well, but ever since the incident when she was injured a few months ago, I've been thinking it would be better to have more than one medic around, in case something should happen to prevent her from being able to perform as a doctor for a while again." He explained as he pulled a bound collection of medical notes from his kimono to give to her.

"What is this?" Chizuru asked.

"Methods to heal the troop's sick and injured, compiled under Matsumoto-sensei's instruction." He replied.

"Yamazaki-san, you did this all on your own?" Chizuru asked, impressed by the thickness of the book and detailed notes. It looked just like the health log Sumiko kept.

"When I am absent, and Miyagawa-san is unable to act for whatever reason, please consult this and undertake treatment." He said. "I'll speak to the commander and vice-commander."

"Iâ€¦ I'll do whatever I can to help. Butâ€¦ But I can't replace you, Yamazaki-san!" Chizuru said earnestly. The way he kept making this sound like some sort of goodbye worried her. Yamazaki stared at her for a moment, surprised.

"Okay." He replied with a small smile.

"I'll do my best." She said, accepting the book of treatments.

"I'm counting on you."

â€œâ^žâ€œ

"Sakamoto was cut down!\_?" Shinpachi exclaimed when he heard the news from Inoue later that evening.

"Harada-kun, apparently your scabbard was found at the scene where Matsumoto was killed." Inoue said, repeating the nasty rumors he had heard.

"Huh!\_?" Sano said incredulously.

"Oh, jeez. Sano-san struck down Sakamoto Ryouma, huh?" Okita said, causing the three men to glance over at him as he entering the room in his sleeping kimono, unable to keep still after overhearing such an interesting conversation. "I wish you would've invited me."

"Don't be stupid!" Sano said, furrowing his brow. "My scabbard is right \_here\_, isn't it?" He pointed out, holding up his sheathed sword, scabbard and all. "Wait, should you even be up?"

"No, he shouldn't." Sumiko said sternly, frowning, as she came out after Okita with a blanket to put around him. "But you try making this hardhead stay put."

"If I didn't get up once in a while, I'd just keep on sleeping." Okita said.

"Well, in any caseâ€¦" Shinpachi said, standing up. "It looks like someone is trying to pin this on the Shinsengumi." Sumiko furrowed her brow as she recalled what history she knew about this point in time.

In November of 1867, the Restoration of Imperial Rule sent the Bakufu and Imperial court into a new era. But less than a month later, Sakamoto Ryouma, who had played a key role in the Restoration, was

assassinated. Once again, the Shinsengumi was inexorably pulled under the great wave of the changing timesâ€|

"Everyone, gather 'round." Hijikata said as he came to call them together for a special meeting.

â€"â^žâ€"

"Saito?" Sano asked as he furrowed his brow, surprised to see their former fellow Shinsengumi member sitting amongst them again.

"What's he doing here?" Shinpachi asked.

"Let me guess, as of today, Saito-san will be returning to the Shinsengumi?" Sumiko asked calmly, catching Kondo, Hijikata, and Saito off-guard.

"What? Was she right?" Okita asked after seeing the surprised look on their faces.

"Sharp as always, eh, Sumiko-san?" Hijikata asked, furrowing his brow as he smiled wryly. Really, this girlâ€| that was supposed to be a secret! Just when did she figure it out?

"What's going on here?" Sano asked.

"By Toshi's orders, Saito-kun infiltrated the Itou faction as our spy.

"Huh?" Sano said, stunned.

"Jeez, Hajime-kun. You did somethin' that fun and kept it a secret from me?" Okita asked with a wry smile, slightly chagrined.

"It was supposed to be a secret from everyone." Hijikata said, glancing pointedly at Sumiko.

"What can I say? It's a gift." Sumiko said, shrugging. "I felt something was off about Saito-san's decision to go with Itou's group, but I figured I should keep it to myself, since it seemed like you guys were trying to keep it all hush-hushâ€|" Even if Saito hadn't been famous for his infiltration of Itou's group in the future, the move hadn't matched his personality as she understood it.

"I appreciate it." Saito said calmly. If someone had spoken out of turn, it could have blown his cover and put the entire operation at risk.

"Well, I get why Sumiko didn't say anything, but Kondo-san, that was pretty mean of you guys." Shinpachi said, rubbing the back of his head.

"Well, it was top secret." Kondo said, sweat-dropping, as he smiled apologetically at them and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "Sorry we had to keep it under wraps. Although, Miyagawa-san still figured it outâ€|" He added with a nervous laugh.

'Thank goodness, Saito-san.' Chizuru thought, smiling at the return of one of their prodigal sons.

"Chizuru." Sumiko said, getting her attention. She smiled wryly at her friend and nodded at the door as she stood up. The guys probably wanted some privacy while they discussed their next plan of action.

"Ah! We'll go make some tea!" Chizuru said, also getting up and heading for the door.

"Yeah. Make it nice and hot, please." Kondo told the girls.

"Hai." Chizuru replied as Sumiko opened the door, and both girls left.

"About Itou's factionâ€¦" Saito began after a few moments. "In terms of their movements, they're clearly trending toward aggressive action against the Shinsengumi."

"Aggressive action?" Inoue asked.

"In order to break the Bakufu, Itou will probably leak information about our Rasetsu Unit." Hijikata said grimly. "They're also the ones who've spread rumors about Harada being involved in Sakamoto's murder, attempting to bring down the Shinsengumi."

"What!\_!?" Shinpachi said incredulously.

"Itou Kashitaroâ€¦ That crafty bastard!" Sano cursed, furrowing his brow.

"We have another problem facing us." Saito said. "Itou's faction is working toward a plan to assassinate the Commander of the Shinsengumi."

"Kondo-san?" Okita asked, narrowing his eyes slightly as his expression darkened.

"That's how things stand." Hijikata said as Sumiko and Chizuru returned with a tray of tea and began sliding the door open. "Itou-san must die, period."

"Heh!\_!?" Chizuru gasped.

"We're taking on the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb?" Sano asked.

"It can't be helped." Kondo said.

"What about Heisuke?" Shinpachi asked.

"If he draws sword against us, we'll have to kill him." Hijikata said sternly, furrowing his brow.

"Hijikata-san!" Chizuru gasped, horrified, as he stood up and stalked past them to leave.

Sumiko frowned and furrowed her brow as she bowed her head in dismay, but she wasn't surprised. She knew this had been coming for a while. There was a heavy silence in the room as the girls glanced from Hijikata's retreating back to the others still in the room. Chizuru clenched her fists in her lap.

"Are you serious? None of you have a problem this\_!\_?" Chizuru asked, appalled.

"That's not it all, Chizuru." Sumiko said grimly after seeing the looks on their faces, placing a hand on her friend's shoulder to calm her down before she got too carried away and hurt them even more than they already were by the difficult situation they found themselves in.

"The truth is, Toshi wants to help him, too." Kondo said somberly. He stood up and quietly stepped past them to leave and follow after Hijikata.

"So do we." Sano said regretfully as he also stood and headed for the door. "We all want Heisuke to come back." Chizuru looked down sadly as he passed and the all the others began to leave, too.

"I'm sorry. I lost my composureâ€¦" Chizuru apologized remorsefully, turning to bow to them as they walked away. The only one who remained in the room now was Saitou.

"This is the end of the Guardians of the Imperial tomb." He said, causing Chizuru to lift her head and look back at him. "If we want to help Heisuke, now's the only time."

"It won't be just them we'll make enemies of, will it?" Sumiko asked. "I'm sure Itou has friends in high placesâ€¦"

"His faction has made secret ties with Satsuma." Saito replied quietly.

Sumiko furrowed her brow. Just as she thoughtâ€¦

"In that case, I'll leave Heisuke to you, Chizuru." Sumiko said, closing her eyes. "I want to stay and keep an eye on the others. If Satsuma gets involved, an oni might show upâ€¦"

"!" Chizuru gasped, but she furrowed her brow and nodded determinedly. "I understand. I'll do my best."

"I know you will." Sumiko said, smiling sadly.

### 36. The Aburanokoji Incident

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 36: The Aburanokoji Incident<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"We're counting on you now." Kondo told Sano and Shinpachi as he and Hijikata prepared to leave to meet Itou on more neutral ground the following day in order to ensure that he would be more likely to come without a guard.<p>

"Incidentally, who should I kill?" Okita asked, feeling left

out.

"You just rest." Hijikata said strictly. "What can you do in your condition?" He asked, furrowing his brow as he turned to leave. To begin with, he shouldn't even be out of bed. Okita let out a wry laugh of defeat.

"I can hold a grudge, Hijikata-san." Okita said as he watched the older man walk away. Kondo turned and headed for the gate as well. Okita furrowed his brow as he bowed his head, frustrated he couldn't do more when Kondo-san's life had been threatened.

“^”

"Sensei, will you really be going alone?" Shinohara asked, concerned.

"Yes. After all, Kondo-san himself invited me." Itou said calmly. "I look forward to it."

"They don't even realize the money they're paying us to investigate Choshu's plans is like paying for the noose to hang themselves with. The Shinsengumi certainly is pitiful." Kano said with a smirk.

"Oh, dear. There's no need to speak so carelessly." Itou told him with a rueful smile.

“^”

"Three hundred ryo, right?" Kondo asked, smiling, as he presented Itou with six fifty-ryo coin cases as payment.

"Yes, sure enough." Itou said, returning his smile, as he reached out and collected the money to take back with him. "I shall accept your payment."

"Please investigate what the Choshu are up to." Kondo said.

"Leave it to me." Itou replied with a small bow of his head.

"All right! Well, now that business is taken care of, shall we have some sake?" Kondo asked on a brighter note. Allowing him to enjoy himself and treating him to some good sake before the end was the least they could do, right?

"Yes." Itou replied with a smile, thinking he may as well enjoy himself since it would mean more money coming out of the Shinsengumi's pocket.

“^”

**\*\*Headquarters of the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb\*\***

It was late in the evening. Heisuke was alone doing some washing by the well, when Saito approached him.

"Heisuke." Saito said, getting his attention.

"Ah. Hajime-kun!" Heisuke said when he looked up. "Where've you been? You've been gone long enough that everyone was starting to worry."

"Do you have a moment?" Saito asked instead of trying to explain.

“^”

"Chizuru?" Heisuke asked, surprised when Saito led him away to meet someone unexpected.

"Heisuke-kun. You're looking well." Chizuru greeted him with a wan smile.

"Hajime-kun?" Heisuke said, glancing back at Saito in confusion. Not that he wasn't glad to see Chizuru again, but what was she doing there? What was this all about? Saito remained silent, leaving it up to Chizuru to explain.

"Why did you come here?" Heisuke asked Chizuru as he crouched down beside the base of the bridge and stared down into the river flowing at the bottom of the steep bank they were on.

"Um... Well, there's something I wanted to tell you." Chizuru replied a little nervously as she stared down at him. She closed her eyes for a moment and steeled her nerves. "Heisuke-kun... Come back to the Shinsengumi." She said earnestly, surprising him.

"Huh!?! Wh-Where did that come from?" He asked, taken aback, as he glanced up at her. Why did she look so serious all of a sudden?

"Please! Don't ask why, just return to the Shinsengumi!" She pleaded urgently. "Otherwise... Heisuke-kun, you'll..."

"Hajime-kun, what's this all about?" Heisuke asked as he glanced back at Saito, starting to feel a little unnerved.

"Itou-san is plotting to assassinate Commander Kondo." Saito told him.

!" Heisuke gasped, shocked.

"I've informed the Shinsengumi of such." Saito finished.

"N-No way! That can't be!" Heisuke exclaimed as he shot to his feet, appalled. "Why would Itou-san kill Kondo-san!?!?"

"Itou-san has joined forces with Satsuma." Saito stated grimly. Heisuke just stared at him with wide eyes, shocked.

“^”

Meanwhile, Sumiko had concealed herself in the shadows near the crossing of Aburanokoji and 7jÃ´, where she knew the main confrontation that had occurred after the initial assassination of Itou would take place. She had chosen a hiding spot far enough away to be a safe distance from the fight that still let her have a good



line of sight of the crossing. Now all she had to do was wait and watch in case the others needed her.

It wasn't long before Sano and Shinpachi's group came into view, dragging Itou's body to the crossing. They left his corpse there as bait for his comrades and quickly concealed themselves in a closer alley to lie in wait for their prey.

Sano furrowed his brow. His face was set with grim determination while they waited for the men from Itou's group to come to take his body away. He and Shinpachi were glad the girls weren't there to see this. It was a gruesome business, and not something they were particularly proud of, but it had to be done. They had to cut off the head of the snake before it bit them. They just hoped Heisuke would have enough sense to stay away!

"Itou-sensei!"

Several members of Itou's faction shouted when they arrived on the scene and found his corpse.

"Gurney men! Over here!" One of them shouted, waving for the men carrying a kogen to come closer so they could put their leader's body inside to carry back to their headquarters. "Damn those Shinsengumi!"

"!" The men gasped when Sano and Shinpachi suddenly charged out to attack. Most of them drew their swords, but a few screamed and ran, abandoning their comrades.

"Bastards! How cowardly, to strike without warning!" One of the remaining men cursed angrily as he and his comrades took up a protective stance around the body of their late leader. "How dare you kill Itou-sensei!\_?"

"Hmph. We're just responding in kind to the fight \_you\_ started!" Sano shouted sternly as he prepared to charge at them with his spear.

“^”

"Heisuke-kun, please!" Chizuru said earnestly as she faced Heisuke. "It's not too late." Heisuke stared at her. Before he could finish making his decision, the sound of running footsteps grew louder as a pack of men headed their way, aiming to cross the bridge.

"Toudou! Come on, now!" Shinohara shouted when he recognized him under the pale moonlight.

"Has something happened?" Heisuke asked.

"The Shinsengumi killed Itou-sensei at Abura-Koji alley!" Abe said.

"!" Heisuke's eyes widened and he turned to glanced back at Chizuru one last time before gritting his teeth and running over to join the others.

"Heisuke-kun!" Chizuru gasped. "Heisuke-kun!" She yelled, rushing over to the bridge after him. "You mustn't go!" But Heisuke kept

running, heedless of her pleas.

"Hey, you." Another man from Itou's faction said as his group also approached the bridge, pointing his sword at her. "I've seen you before. You're with the Shinsengumi, aren't you?"

"What was that!?" The man behind him asked. Chizuru nervously took a step back and placed her hand on the hilt of her sword as the new group of men surrounded her. Her hand trembled as she prepared to draw her sword. Saito came up from behind and place a hand on her shoulder, reminding her that she was not alone.

"It's Saito!" One of the men said, astonished, when he stepped forward to protect her.

"Go, Yukimura." Saito told Chizuru calmly as he stared down all the other men.

"Ah, Hai!" Chizuru said, hurrying after Heisuke. She had to stop him before he reached the others!

"Wait!" A man shouted, charging after her.

\_SLASH!\_

"Aaah!" He screamed when Saito cut him down.

"Saito, you bastard!" The others cursed. "You've betrayed us!?"

"Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!"

"Hurry up and go." Saito told Chizuru when he noticed she was still standing there.

"!" Chizuru gasped as she turned and ran. That's right, she couldn't waste time! If she didn't stop Heisuke, he would die!

~~~~~

Sano and the other members were all breathing heavily after having just finished defeating the men who had come to collect Itou's body.

"!" Sano said, startled when a half-dead man suddenly reached out and grabbed his ankle. "Tch!" He furrowed his brow and raised his spear, getting ready to finish the job.

\_BANG!\_

They all looked up, startled when someone beat Sano to putting the enemy out of his misery by shooting him. It was Shiranui!

"We'll be sure to avenge you." Shiranui promised the dead man. "Yo, humans!" He greeted the alarmed members of the Shinsengumi.

"So, you came to play after all?" Sumiko said as she finally stepped out of the shadows and walked over to join the others, drawing her sword.

"Sumiko!\_? What are you doing here?" Shinpachi asked, surprised.

"More importantly, what are \_they\_ doing here?" Sano asked, furrowing his brow, as he kept his eyes on the oni.

"Isn't it obvious? We're here for work." Shiranui replied. "We came to watch you idiots fall right into our trap."

"Trap?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow. She didn't remember hearing anything about that in history class. Shiranui waved his hand, and troops of men came rushing out from the darkness to surround them. She sweat-dropped, feeling chagrined at herself for having missed them. Was the whole city hiding out in these alleys tonight, or something?

"Looks like you picked the wrong time to come out, Sumiko." Shinpachi commented as they all took up better fighting stances. "Good job getting' all these guys together." He told the oni, smirking. "Goin' by the looks of them, they're from Satsuma, huh?"

"Yeah. Saitou said Itou had connections to them." Sumiko confirmed. "That's why I'm here. Sorry for surprising you all like that, but I had a bad feeling one of \_them\_ might show up." She explained, referring to the oni.

"I get it. You worried, so you came to back us up, huh? Thanks, Sumiko. I appreciate it." Sano said. It looked like they were going to need all the help they could get now.

"Yeah, but I didn't count on it being a trap." Sumiko said, furrowing her brow, as she glanced around at all the enemies surrounding them before looking back at the two oni. "I see. So you decided to sacrifice Itou's group to get rid of the thorn in your side, huh? Who needs enemies when they have Satsuma as a friend?" She asked sardonically with a rueful expression.

"My apologies for trying to catch you off guard." Amagiri said politely. "However, we too must follow the orders of the domain."

"Never mind you." Sano told him. "Shiranui, you bastard, weren't you supposed to be on Choshu's side? I'm gonna laugh if you tell me you've changed colors."

"Unfortunately, Satsuma and Choshu seem to be gettin' along quite nicely." Shiranui informed them as a group of men from Choshu came up from behind the oni to join in facing off against the Shinsengumi.

"Hmph. Another secret alliance, huh?" Sumiko asked. So, they had already come together to form 'Satcho' | "Why don't you get a few more guys, and then we'll have ourselves an \_even\_ fight?" She remarked sarcastically, earning a smirk from Shiranui.

~~~~~

Okita awoke in his futon back at headquarters in another fit of harsh

coughing.

\_SLIDE.\_

He sat up cautiously when the door of his room began to slide open and turned to see Nagumo Kaoru standing in the open doorway, staring down at him.

"I wondered who it was." He said tensely. "You did well, making it this far."

"Rest easy. I simply came to repay you for the other day." Kaoru told him, entering his room and taking a seat.

"Repay me?" He asked as he watched Kaoru reach inside her sleeve. She removed a small glass bottle of Ochimizu and placed it on the floor in front of him. Okita furrowed his brow and his expression darkened. He would recognize that suspicious-looking red liquid anywhere.

"Why do you have this?" He demanded calmly.

"I received it from Koudou-san." Kaoru replied.

"Koudou-san, huh?" Okita asked dubiously. Well, outside of the Shinsengumi, he was probably the only one she could have gotten it from. "What's your relationship with him?"

"He's my father." Kaoru said. "And Chizuru is my younger twin sister. Our family was destroyed after the main branch refused to help overthrow the Bakufu. Chizuru went with Koudou-san while I was taken in by the Nagumo clan in Tosa. We were torn away from each other."

"So, you're an oni too, huh?" Okita said as he stared at her. There was no denying the family resemblance. Kaoru was the spitting image of Chizuru.

"Yes. You're rather calm about it." Kaoru remarked with a small laugh. "Chizuru told me of your illness. This Ochimizu can heal the illness eating away at you."

"That girl would never tell someone else about my illness. I promised that if she talked, I'd kill her." He told her, picking up the sword beside his bed.

"Are you able to fight in your current condition?" Kaoru asked.

"Iâ€|" Okita said, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. "I can still fight!" He declared defiantly, drawing his sword and lashing out at her in one swift blow. "!" He said, surprised when Kaoru seemed to suddenly disappear like a ghost as she effortlessly dodged the attack that should've taken her head off, landing softly on the porch just outside the door as she reappeared. Kaoru looked down upon him disdainfully as she slid the door shut and disappeared for good this time. For a moment, Okita held his position, stunned.

"Ngh!" He groaned in pain as sat back on the futon, lowering his sword. He couldn't believe how much such a simple move had taken out of him. A bead of sweat slid down his pale face as he stared at the

bottle of Ochimizu that Kaoru had left behind.

### 37. The Course of Bonds

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 37: The Course of Bonds<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>As Heisuke drew closer to the crossing of Aburanokoji and 7jÃ´, he could hear the sounds of an intense battle. Men were yelling and swords were clashing. His eyes widened, and he skidded to an abrupt halt when he spotted Itou's corpse among the other dead bodies littering the alleyway. It was trueâ€¦ It was really happeningâ€¦<p>

"Yaah!" He looked ahead at the sound of a familiar cry and saw Sumiko take out a Satsuma samurai who had been going for Shinpachi's back while he was busy fighting off two other opponents.

"Heisuke-kunâ€¦" Chizuru said as she rounded the corner, trailing off when she saw the carnage before them and their friends fighting together in the middle of it. Of all the men they had brought with them from the Shinsengumi, only Sano and Shinpachi and Sumiko were still standing now. "Heh. This many opponents, and you're still only using the back of your blade?" Shinpachi asked as he kicked one of the men away and cut down the other. "If you don't get serious, you'll get hurt!"

"I like a good fight just as much as the next person," Sumiko said, knocking out another enemy, "but as a doctor, the idea of taking lives with the same hands that are supposed to save them still just doesn't sit right with me. Besides, who says I'm not serious? I'm seriously risking my life here! It's just that I'd rather get a few cuts and bruises while upholding my beliefs than letting something like this shake me enough to do injury to my own soul. A battered body is easier to heal than a battered spirit. Even if I can't move anymore or my back gets bent out of shape, it doesn't matterâ€¦" as long as my soul's still straight, I'll keep going."

"Well, that's just like you, Sumiko-san." Sano said with a rueful smile as he cut down two more enemies. "Do what you want. Just disable as many as of them as possible and leave the 'disposal' to us!" He told her as the three of them regrouped to form a tighter defensive formation. They were all panting from the seemingly endless fight they had been drawn into as the next wave of opponents came forth. Amagiri smiled slightly as he stepped to the front of the line to address them.

"I have a proposal for the members of the Shinsengumi." He said, deciding to give them a chance of out respect for the half oni's determination. Miyagawa Sumiko's resolution not to kill even at the possible cost of her own life had struck a chord with his own dislike for senseless violence. The three of them furrowed their brows and glared warily at him, wondering what he was up to. "Would you be inclined to give us Yukimura Chizuru-kun, who is just over there? I

shall allow everyone else to escape if you do."

"What!?" Shinpachi said incredulously as all three of them gasped in surprise. Their eyes widened as they turned to follow his gaze as saw that Chizuru was standing only about a yard or two further behind them than Heisuke, who had also arrived unnoticed while they were preoccupied with their fight.

"Chizuru! What are you? Heisuke, get her out of here!" Sumiko shouted, appalled to see how close they both were to danger. She grit her teeth in frustration. Even though, she knew Heisuke was supposed to die here tonight, she wasn't about to just sit back and let it happen!

"I do not believe it is an unfair trade." Amagiri said, frowning slightly. Although he knew Miyagawa Sumiko was protective of Yukimura Chizuru, he had hoped to receive a more favorable reaction. "With this difference in numbers, I can't advise that you fight." The wall of men behind him served to emphasize his point. The three of them could only keep this up for so long. "Yukimura Chizuru. Will you accept our proposal, yes or no?" He asked, turning his attention onto the pureblood female oni.

"I!" Chizuru said, looking at the worried and tired faces of all her friends. "If I go over to your side the others will be spared, right?" She asked solemnly, furrowing her brow with determination. They were always protecting her, now it was her turn to do something to protect them.

"Chizuru!" Sumiko said as her friend started walking, heading over to trade herself for their safety.

'Chizuru!' Heisuke thought as she passed him. Sumiko bit her lip and furrowed her brow as Chizuru stepped by. Sumiko sheathed her sword and started following her.

"Sumiko-san?" Chizuru said, pausing for a moment as she glanced back at her friend in confusion.

"I said it before, didn't I? I'll go where you go." Sumiko said determinedly. "There's no way I'm letting you walk into enemy territory alone. Is that acceptable?" She asked grimly, turning to face Amagiri.

"Yes." He replied calmly. "We are prepared to accept that response as well." Shiranui smirked. He had been wondering what Amagiri was up to. At any rate, it looked like they were getting two for the price of one, now. The two female oni began walking forward together now. They were almost within reach, when Shinpachi and Sano moved to blocked their way.

"That was pretty cool, Chizuru and Sumiko." Sano told them.

"But leave the rest to us." Shinpachi added. "Get Chizuru to safety, Sumiko."

"Harada-san! Nagakura-san!" Chizuru said, surprised.

"What? You can't expect me to just leave you!" Sumiko protested as Sano took up an offensive stance in front of them.

"Let's go." Sano told the oni, furrowing his brow, as he glared straight ahead at the oni and all the men with them. "Rather than handing them over so we can live, I'll take you all down with me instead!"

"Now look who's actin' cool." Shinpachi said with a wry smirk. "Heisuke!" He shouted, glancing back at their group's prodigal son. "Why're you just standin' there!\_? You wanna let Sano be the only one to look cool!\_?"

"!" Heisuke said, snapping out of it. He laughed quietly to himself as he started walking over to join them. "Shinpatsu-san, Sano-san, you're always like this. When it comes to a fight, it's always this way. You call out for me, regardless of what I'm doin'."

"You're the same way, right?" Sano asked.

"Mn!" Heisuke said determinedly as he drew his sword and stood to fight with his friends once again. Sano smirked as they fiercely stared down their opponents together.

"It's been a while since the three of us have fought like this, huh?" He asked. That alone made the decision to stand and face the overwhelming odds worth it.

"Heisuke! It hasn't been so long that you've lost your skill, right?" Shinpachi teased.

"I ain't got so bad I gotta have the two of \_you\_ worryin' about it!" Heisuke retorted.

"Yaaahh!" The Satcho men yelled as they charged and the three Shinsengumi captains rushed forward to meet them.

"Stay close, Chizuru!" Sumiko said determinedly, smiling slightly, as she hung back to guard her friend's safety so the men could focus on the fight. She wasn't about to deprive those three of the chance to fight and show off together again. Heisuke was back on their side. Even though they were still outnumbered, it felt like there was hope for the future. After all, Heisuke had just changed his own, hadn't he?

Amagiri let out a sigh of disappointment. He stepped forward into the fray. The humans and Miyagawa Sumiko all seemed to have gotten a second wind. If this was how it was going to be, then there was no point in dragging it out. He may as well end it now.

"Amagiri. You're goin' down by my hands!" Heisuke challenged him.

"You intend to challenge me alone?" Amagiri asked, noting that his comrades were already otherwise engaged.

"You're facin' me whether you like it or not!" Heisuke said, raising his sword, yelling boldly as he charged at the oni. He still hadn't paid him back for that night at the Ikedaya! Amagiri simply deflected Heisuke's sword to the side with the back of his fist and sent the young human flying back with a blow to his abdomen.

"Aaah! Ungh!" Heisuke cried out, hitting the ground with a harsh thud.

"Heisuke-kun!" Chizuru cried out in alarm when she saw this, leaving the safety of Sumiko's side to run towards him.

"Ah!" Sumiko gasped as she glanced away from the opponent she had currently locked swords with. Her eyes widened when she saw three enemies headed directly for her friend. "Chizuru!"

"Ah!" Chizuru cried out when one of the men raised his sword, about to strike her down.

"Chizuru!" Heisuke shouted, gritting his teeth, as he pushed himself up and threw his sword away to protect her, killing the man before he could strike. Sumiko ran over and took care of the other two.

"Are you all?" She and Chizuru gasped when they saw that Amagiri had taken hold of the unarmed Heisuke and was holding him high up off the ground by the front of his kimono. "Heisuke!"

"Your bravery is admirable." Amagiri commended him as he raised his other hand. "However, it is foolish!" In one powerful strike, he thrust his free hand up sent Heisuke flying with a blow to the chest. Heisuke's eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he coughed up blood as he immediately lost consciousness.

"Heisuke-kun!" Chizuru screamed as Sumiko shot forward to catch him and break his fall.

"Heisuke!" Shinpachi shouted when he turned and saw her sliding back while clutching onto their friend's limp body. He and Chizuru ran over to Sumiko's side as she laid Heisuke down and began examining him.

"!" Sumiko gasped as her eyes widened in horror.

"Hey! Heisuke! How's he doing?" Sano asked as he backed up towards them, keeping his eye on the enemies as he took up a protective stance in front of them.

"He's not breathing!" She said, gritting her teeth and furrowing her brow as she felt around for a pulse and placed her head on top of chest.

"What!?" Shinpachi cried in disbelief. He glanced down at Heisuke and saw that his empty eyes were staring sightlessly up at the night sky while they huddled around him.

"Back up! Go help Sano-san!" Sumiko said sternly, snapping him out of it. "I need time and space to work!"

"But you just said he wasn't breathing! What are you?" Shinpachi started to ask, shocked when Sumiko suddenly tilted back Heisuke's head and pressed her lips to his. "Oi!?"

"It's all right, Nagakura-san!" Chizuru said urgently as she watched Heisuke's chest rise from Sumiko's breath inflating his lungs. "I've seen Sumiko-san do this before! She's going to save Heisuke-kun!" Sumiko gave Heisuke another rescue breath before checking his



pulse.

"His heart's stopped beating as well! Chizuru, you remember when I showed you how to do chest compression before, right? I'm tired from fighting and CPR's exhausting. I need you to help me administer the chest compressions while I do the breathing."

"Hai!" Chizuru said, quickly moving into position to help.

"Jeez. These guys are a bunch of morons." Shiranui commented as he watched. "First they seem like they're in a hurry to die, and now they think they can bring back the dead?"

"Shut the hell up!" Sano shouted angrily, about to charge at the infuriating oni with his spear, when more men stepped forward to block him. Shinpachi grabbed his word and came over to join him in protecting Heisuke and the girls. Together the two men began cutting down more enemies while Amagiri curiously watched the two girls work on reviving Heisuke.

"Anything yet?" Chizuru asked worriedly as Sumiko paused to check Heisuke's vitals again.

"All right! He's got a pulse! It's weak but!shit!" Sumiko cursed as the look of momentary relief on her face darkened with a terrible new realization. "Scoot over, Chizuru!" She said, moving to kneel closer to Heisuke's chest as she raised her fist high above her head.

\_WHAM!\_

"S-Sumiko-san!\_" Chizuru cried, startled when Sumiko suddenly slammed her fist down on top of Heisuke's heart with great force.

"Shh! It's just a precordial thump." Sumiko quickly explained, hushing her friend, as she felt Heisuke's neck for a pulse again and pressed her head to his chest to listen to his heartbeat. "Okay! All right. Good. The tachycardia's been disrupted. His heart's back to normal, but he still isn't breathing." She said, taking a deep breath before pressing her lips against Heisuke's for another rescue breath. That hit from Amagiri had really done a number on Heisuke's heart for it to set right into tachycardia just after being restarted by CPR.

"Eh? Tachycardia?" Chizuru asked, blinking in confusion. She was about to ask if she still needed to do more chest compressions, when Sumiko abruptly reared back when Heisuke let out a reflexive cough when his lungs started to work again.

"What the? Did they seriously just bring that kid back to life?" Shiranui asked Amagiri, watching in disbelief as they rolled the still unconscious but now breathing Heisuke onto his side so he wouldn't choke on the blood he was coughing up. "Is that even possible?"

"It would seem so!" Amagiri replied stoically as he watched the miracle that was occurring before them. The boy was obviously still in critical condition, but he was alive. "Koudou said she was his student, but it would seem the apprentice is even more knowledgeable

than the master."

"Man, if she were to ever get involved with perfecting those 'fakes', we'd be finished." Shiranui said with a rueful grin.

"Shinpachi, Sano! Heisuke's alive, but he's got some internal bleeding!" Sumiko said as she looked up from her patient. "We need to get him back to headquarters so I can operate!"

"Easier said than done! Dammit, there's no end to them!" Shinpachi grunted as he cut down another opponent, though both he and Sano were relieved to hear that their friend was breathing again.

"Shinpachi." Sano said determinedly. "If things get bad, make sure Sumiko and Chizuru are safe."

\_SLASH!\_ \_SWIPE! SLASH!\_

"!" They all said, surprised when the whole row of men who had been about to charge at them were suddenly cut down with incredible speed.

"Saito!" Sano said, surprised when the men fell, revealing their attacker. Saito had used the enemy's misconception that he was part of Itou's faction to sneak in from the back. Saito quietly finished walking over to join his Shinsengumi comrades while the Satcho men just stared at him, stunned.

"Sorry. I was delayed." Saito said coolly as he turned to face the enemy with his friends and raised his sword. "Leave this to me." He said determinedly.

With Saito there, they were able to turn the tide against their foes. Some of the other men even turned tail and ran.

"Chizuru, help me get this door." Sumiko said, and together the two of them pulled off the door of a nearby shop to use as a stretcher board. They could reimburse the owners later.

"Oh, are you running away?" Shiranui asked when Sano, Shinpachi, and Saito cut down their last opponents, and they fell back to protect the girls and help them carry Heisuke away.

"Shut up!" Sumiko snapped sternly as they kept going even though the two oni were still there. "We ain't got time for that! We'll deal with you later!" Shiranui blinked as he stared after them while they all scurried off to bring their wounded comrade back to their headquarters so they could try to save him.

"Heh. They've got guts turning their backs on us like that." He commented with a rueful smirk. "Is it all right for us not to go after them?"

"Yes. Our work here is finished." Amagiri replied calmly. "The damage has been done. They may think they're getting away, but this will come to back to haunt them further down the road. They have sealed their own fate."

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

## <p><strong>Chapter 38: Trading the Sun for the Moon<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Okita stood out in the courtyard, staring up at the cloudy and grey sky. The long night of fighting at Aburanokoji had already given way to morning.<p>

"!" Okita cringed in pain as another fit of violent coughing came over him. He pulled a cloth out of his kimono sleeve to cover his mouth. When he stopped and looked down at the white cloth, it was stained red with blood. He automatically tensed when he heard the sound of footsteps on the porch a few yards back and quickly hid the bloody cloth as he turned to see that it was just Chizuru returning with more water and a cloth so that she and Sumiko could finish cleaning and bandaging Heisuke's wounds. He watched as she set the bucket of water down and opened the door, giving him a view of Heisuke's sleeping face. He looked so peaceful, that if Okita hadn't known Sumiko had spent the whole of twilight operating and struggling to save his life, he would have thought he was just taking a nap. He could see the troubled and somewhat guilt-ridden expression on Sumiko's face while she stared down tiredly at her unconscious patient. She had done everything she could for him, but in the end it hadn't been enough. Chizuru quietly moved the bucket of water into the room and shut the door behind her. San'nan-san would be coming to collect Heisuke soon.

â€"â^žâ€"

"That damn Rasetsu Unit." Shinpachi cursed. "How long do they plan to keep it going?" He and Sano had been waiting up to hear more news on Heisuke's condition, and then \_that\_ bombshell had been dropped on them. "It's not like I want Heisuke to die or anything, butâ€| If you go fightin' like crazy, sometimes you're the one who ends up hurt. Still, can't they just let him die here?" He asked, clenching his fist. Heisuke went down fighting for them. Couldn't they just leave him in peace? Sumiko had done all she could to save him, but the damage to his major organs had been worse than she thought. She just couldn't get the internal bleeding to stopâ€|

"I understand how you feel." Sano said as he examined the freshly cleaned and sharpened tip of his spear. "But it was probably Heisuke himself who decided to become a rasetsu." He stated calmly. He doubted Sumiko-san would have allowed them to intervene otherwise. They both knew how she felt about using that medicine on people. She thought its negative aspects too heavily outweighed the positive. She had even gone so far as to call it cruel.

"You agree with that wretched plan, too!\_?" Shinpachi shouted incredulously.

"No, but I feel I'm in no place to say what's right or wrong." Sano replied.

"This is goin' nowhere!" Shinpachi said as he stomped out of the

room, frustrated.

"I'm jealous that you can get angry like that." Sano commented as he watched his friend storm off.

â€"â^žâ€"

\*\*December, 1867

>Fushimi Magistrate's Office<strong>

A month after the Aburanokoji Incident, both the Satsuma and Choshu Domains prepared for war in earnest and had their forces assemble in Kyoto. To counter this, the Shinsengumi once again went to the Fushimi Magistrate's office and prepared for battle.

That evening, Chizuru and Sumiko were helping out by washing some cups at the well after serving tea.

Sumiko glanced up suddenly when she felt a strange presence approaching them. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw who it was.

"Yo." Heisuke said as he silently approached them from behind.

"!" Chizuru gasped as she jumped to her feet, so startled to hear his voice after not seeing him for a whole month, that she dropped the cup in her hand.

\_SHATTER!\_

"Ah." They all said as they stared down at the broken tea cup. That was coming out of someone's pay. Not that Chizuru and Sumiko actually got paidâ€|

"Sorry. Did I scare you?" He asked Chizuru, smiling apologetically.

"Heisuke-kun! You're better already?" Chizuru asked.

"Are you okay to be walking around?" Sumiko asked. She knew he wasn't exactly a normal human anymore, but considering the condition he had been in when he chose to take the Ochimizuâ€| Those weren't paper-cuts he had been recovering from. He'd almost died!

"Yeah. Looks like my wounds have healed. I'm no different from before." He said with the same cheeky smile as always.

"I see." Chizuru said, feeling relieved.

"Exceptâ€| dusk looks like dawn to me, and the moon like the sun, I guess." He said, shielding his eyes as he stared up at the moon.

"I'm sorry." Chizuru said quietly, bowing her head. "It's because you protected me thatâ€|"

"If we're playing the blame game, then it's my fault for not being able to stop the bleedingâ€|" Sumiko said, solemnly.

"Huh? It's not your faults at all. If I'd been even stronger, I

wouldn't have gotten hurt." Heisuke said, trying to reassure them. He flexed his lean muscles for show. "My own weakness is to blame."

"Heisuke-kunâ€|"

"Also, I was the one who chose to take the medicine." He reminded them. "I feel like I still have things to do. So, don't worry yourselves about it, Chizuru, Sumiko."

"Un." Chizuru said, nodding.

"Well, I guess at this point I'm just glad you're still alive." Sumiko said, smiling wanly, while Chizuru leaned down to start picking up the broken cup shards. "I was seriously worried you were going die that night." Well, in the end the official story remained the same. After Heisuke chose to become a rasetsu, he was officially listed amongst the dead, just like with San'nan-san. Even though they were still alive as part of the Rasetsu Unit, the rest of the world at large believed they had died in just the same ways as she had learned in history classâ€|

"Eh? That's mean, Sumiko-san. Don't you have any faith in me?" He asked, sweat-dropping as he smiled wryly.

"Ow." Chizuru gasped quietly in pain when her fingers slipped on the wet ceramic, and she ended up cutting them on the sharp edge of the shard she had been trying to pick up.

"Oh. You okay, Chizuru?" Heisuke asked as he and Sumiko leaned down to check on her.

"Let me see." Sumiko said, gently taking the younger girl's injured hand to examine it. There was no need, however, as the wound was so shallow that it healed almost instantly. The blood made it look worse than it actually was.

\_THUMP.\_

"Ach-Guh!" Heisuke groaned in pain when it felt like something had snapped inside of him at the sight and smell of Chizuru's blood. His eyes widened and his pupils constricted as he turned his back on the sight and began staggering away from them. "Aah!"

"Heisuke-kun?" Chizuru asked as the two girls glanced up, concerned when he fell to his knees.

"St-Stay back, Chizuruâ€|" He groaned he lay on the ground, cringing as his hair faded to white and his eyes began to glow red.

"!" Sumiko gasped as her eyes widened in realization. The blood! "Chizuru, quick! Wash the blood away!"

"Eh?" Chizuru said, furrowing her brow slightly in confusion. "It's not the time to worry about something like that, Sumiko-san! Heisuke-kunâ€|"

"Miyagawa-san is correct to be worried. The scent of your blood is agitating him." San'nan said as he approached them. "It's his bloodlust. It will pass if he feeds on blood."

"San'nan-san." Chizuru said nervously, covering her bloody hand with the other one instinctively to hide the lack of wound.

"N-No!" Heisuke protested as he struggled with himself. "I won'tâ€¦ I can't feed on blood!"

"What reason is there to resist? If you want blood you should have some." San'nan told him.

'Whatâ€¦!\_!\_?' Sumiko thought as her eyes widened in horror, appalled by the implications of what he had just said. This wasn't like modern times, where they could just go to a hospital or something and grab a couple of blood bags. Blood transfusions had to be done directly without proper refrigeration to store any donated blood, and even that in itself was an incredibly rare eventâ€¦ Was San'nan actually tellingâ€¦no even worse, \_encouraging\_â€¦Heisuke to feed directly from another human!\_!\_?

"Please stop, San'nan-san!" Chizuru said nervously. "Don't give Heisuke-kun strange ideas!"

" 'Strange ideas'? Just as humans eat food, it's natural for us Rasetsu to desire blood." San'nan stated with an insidious gleam in his eye. His expression lightened momentarily, as if surprised by a sudden thought that occurred to him. "Do oni not have bloodlust?" He asked curiously.

"!" Chizuru gasped, appalled.

"No." Sumiko replied firmly, furrowing her brow. "At least, we don't. San'nan-san, are you even hearing yourself right now?"

"It's all right, Chizuru, Sumiko. I'm not gonna drink blood." Heisuke reassured them, panting heavily as he pushed himself back onto his feet, placing himself between them and San'nan. "That's not something humans doâ€¦ right?" He asked, grimacing slightly from the pain he was in as he glanced back at them.

"Heisuke-kunâ€¦" Chizuru said as Sumiko's expression softened upon seeing how much he was suffering.

"You think you're still human?" San'nan asked, causing them to glanced back at him. "Though a rasetsu, you're still bound by human morals. 'Unfortunate' is the only way to put it. However, I, too, am a human turned rasetsu. I understand your confusion. If the urge for blood is simply unacceptableâ€¦" He stepped forward and held out a packet of medicine. "Take this."

Sumiko furrowed her brow. It could only be one thing. So they did get the medicine she made from Matsumoto-senseiâ€¦ Why did he only bring it out as a last resort?

"San'nan-san, what is that?" Chizuru asked, knowing nothing of the arrangements Sumiko had made.

"A medicine that Matsumoto-sensei made," San'nan replied, "one that controls bloodlust."

"!" Heisuke gasped as he immediately reached out and grabbed it so he

could take it.

"Here, let me." Sumiko said, holding out her hand, when she saw he was having trouble unfolding the packet with his shaking hands. "You'll rip it if you try to open it like that." She opened the medicine packet for Heisuke while Chizuru grabbed a cup and filled it with water for him to use to take the medicine with. Heisuke nodded in thanks as he took the medicine and gulped down the water to wash away its metallic taste.

"Agh!" He gasped after he had drained the cup. Almost immediately, his white hair darkened back to its usual shade of brown.

"Thank you very much, San'nan-san." Chizuru said, relieved to see Heisuke back to normal. However, Sumiko was giving him a stern look for not bringing the medicine out sooner.

"It's nothing to thank me for." San'nan told Chizuru. "After all, it is only a temporary measure."

"Temporary?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow.

"For us rasetsu, the pain will continue until we taste blood." San'nan explained as he turned to walk away.

"San'nan-san." Heisuke said, causing the rasetsu to pause for a moment. "You're going out on patrol again?" He asked hesitantly. Sumiko noticed San'nan was already wearing his sword.

"Yes." San'nan replied without looking back before continuing on his way.

Sumiko frowned. She didn't like the sound of thatâ€¦

### 39. Those Who Fall

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 39: Those who Fall<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>December 10, 1867<strong>

The snow was falling silently outside while Okita sat up in his futon and coughed terribly inside his room. After waiting for a moment to make sure his latest painful brush with almost coughing up one of his own lungs subsided, he removed the small vial of Ochimizu that Nagumo Kaoru had left behind from his sleeve and stared at it. She had claimed it could cure his illness, butâ€¦

"!" Okita quickly hid the vial when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps and a familiar silhouette appeared on the other side of his door.

"How are you feeling, Souji?" Kondo asked as opened. "Hey, now! You need to stay lying down." He chided the chided Okita as he entered

the room and knelt down beside his futon, placing his hands on his shoulders. "Your body's freezing cold."

"I'm all right." Okita said, smiling wryly as Kondo immediately began to remove his own haori to give to him.

"No, this won't do." Kondo insisted as he placed the warm haori over Okita's cold shoulders. "Here. Cold causes all kinds of illnesses. You don't want to be scolded by Miyagawa-san again, do you?"

"What's he done that he'd need scolding for?" Sumiko asked as she popped her head into the room, alerting them to her presence. Chizuru smiled wryly as she stood behind her friend and bowed in greeting to them. They had just been on their way to check on Okita when they overheard the tail end of their conversation. "Ah, it's freezing in here! Why didn't you light the hibachi?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow in disapproval as she crossed the room to light the charcoal brazier and warm up the room for him. Kondo smiled as he watched and turned back to Chizuru.

"Ah, Yukimura-kun. Sorry, but could you bring a cup of hot tea?" He asked.

"Yes, that's a good idea, Kondo-san." Sumiko said, nodding in approval. "If you don't take better care of yourself, I'll make you some leek and bak choi soup if you don't behave yourself." She threatened, a grimace from Okita at the mere thought. She'd do it, too.

"Hai." Chizuru said, smiling. She bowed politely and left to make Okita some hot tea to warm him up.

"This smells like Kondo-san." Okita commented with a small smile, enjoying the warmth of the haori.

"It smells\_!\_?" Kondo asked, alarmed, as he picked up the sleeve and sniffed it to make sure it wasn't too offensive.

"Pfft, haha." Okita chuckled. That was typical Kondo-san. He was too nice.

"What's so funny, Souji?" Kondo asked, confused.

"Nothing, really." Souji replied with a smile despite the pain he was in from laughing with his sore lungs. "But that's one thing I like about you, Kondo-san."

"A thing you like? My smell\_!\_?" Kondo asked, bewildered.

"Ahaha!" Okita laughed, while Sumiko smiled wryly at the heartwarming scene. She could tell Kondo was like a father to Okita from the way he was smiling, and Kondo's lost expression was priceless. It felt like it had been ages since she'd seen last Okita smile like that.

"Kondo-san. It'll be time to leave soon." Hijikata announced when he spotted the commander through the open doors.

"Yeah." Kondo said, smiling as they turned to face him. Hijikata smiled slightly at the sight of Kondo sitting next to Okita while



wearing his kimono. The two of them really looked alike like that, with Okita imitating the commander's hairstyle.

As Kondo left with Hijikata to prepare to leave to attend the war council at Nijo Castle, Chizuru returned with a cup of hot tea on a tray. Okita was quietly sipping his tea when he noticed the looks on the two girls' faces.

"What's with you two?" He asked, wondering why they were both smiling so much just from watching him drink tea.

"Wearing that haori, you look more and more like Kondo-san." Chizuru replied with an even brighter smile.

"Like father and son." Sumiko agreed, suppressing a smirk at the look on his face.

"Why, youâ€¦" Okita said lowly, looking like he was caught between being pleased by their comments and being angry that they had got him right in his weak spot. "Keep mouthing off like that, and I really will kill you." He told them, chagrined.

"There's no need to be embarrassed." Sumiko told him with a wry smile. "You don't have to be blood to be family."

â€œâˆžâ€œ

Sumiko and Chizuru were walking along the porch when a sprig of wild chrysanthemums landed softly a few inches in front of them. The two girls glanced across the yard to see who had thrown it and saw Kimigiku standing next to the bare tree. She bowed respectfully to them in greeting.

"Kimigiku-san!" Chizuru gasped.

"Nice calling card." Sumiko complimented her, pausing to pick up the flower before walking over to meet the kunoichi with Chizuru.

"What's the matter?" Chizuru asked.

"I have an urgent matter to discuss with commander Kondo." Kimigiku replied calmly.

"Unfortunately, Kondo-san is out right now." Sumiko said, wondering what it could be.

"Then, is Hijikata-san here by any chance?" Sen asked, poking her head out from behind the tree.

"Osen-chan!" Chizuru said, surprised. Sen smiled as she stepped out from behind the tree.

"It's been awhile, Chizuru-chan, Sumiko-san."

â€œâˆžâ€œ

"As a rule, outsiders are forbidden from entering here." Hijikata told Senhime and Kimigiku. This wasn't their headquarters, and they were supposed to be preparing for battle. They couldn't just have

guests coming and going as they pleased. Sneaking in here during such a time was an awfully risky thing for them to do. "Just what do you want?"

"I'm sorry." Sen said. "There's something I had to discuss with you today."

"Um, I'll go put on some tea." Chizuru said, preparing to leave.

"No." Sen said, before she or Sumiko could move. "We'll be leaving soon after our talk. I want the two of you to hear this as well."

"Okay." Chizuru said as she and Sumiko nodded in understanding. From the look on Sen's face, it must be something pretty serious.

"There is only one thing to discuss." Sen continued as she faced Hijikata again. "The rasetsus."

"Rasetsus?" Hijikata asked, wondering how she knew about them.

Sumiko sweat-dropped. This 'secret' really wasn't much of a secret anymore, was it?

"I will get right to it." Sen said. "They are failures, so how long do you intend to use them? They are more than you can control. The Shinsengumi must have nothing more to do with them."

"It's up to us to decide whether they're failures." Hijikata replied stiffly. These were people's lives they were talking about. If the Rasetsu Unit was disbanded because they were viewed as a too much of a threat, the Bakufu would undoubtedly want them all to be put down, including San'nan-san and Heisuke. "You're in no position to carry on about it."

"Well then, did you know that your rasetsus are killing people in the name of their 'patrols'?" Kimigiku asked.

"What?" Hijikata asked as he and Sumiko furrowed her brows upon hearing such troubling news. Sumiko's mind immediately went back to the feeling of foreboding she had when San'nan left for his patrol after talking about how 'unfortunate' Heisuke was constricting himself with 'human morals'.

"Their tendency to suddenly fall apart has not improved at all." Kimigiku said. "For those charged with protecting the peace within the capital to kill innocent civilians is a grave reversal of roles."

"And there's something else. Chizuru-chan. Sumiko-san." Sen said, glancing at the two girls. "Won't you leave here and come with us?" She asked.

"Eh?" Chizuru said, surprised. Sumiko blinked. She hadn't quite been expecting that either.

"Why?" Sumiko asked. Were the other oni coming after them again?

"Kyoto shall soon become a battlefield. We've asked you this before, but the situation has changed." Sen said solemnly, genuinely concerned for their safety. "You know that too, don't you?"

"Yes." Sumiko replied regretfully as she and Chizuru bowed their heads. They were about to pass the point of no return. Sumiko furrowed her brow and clenched her fists, wishing she could do more to help the Shinsengumi, but she didn't think telling them what she knew now would do them any good.

"If you come with us, these people can concentrate themselves on the fight." Sen said, seeing how conflicted the two girls were feeling.

"Ah!" Chizuru said, glancing up at Hijikata before looking down again. That's right. Sumiko could be really helpful to them since she could fight and be a doctor for them, but she... what could she do? She didn't want to be a burden. "I..."

"You don't wanna leave, do you?" Hijikata said, staring directly at Chizuru.

"Eh?" Chizuru said, glancing back up at him.

"If that's so, don't bother thinkin' about anything else." He told her. "You can stay here." He said firmly. Sumiko smiled slightly and looked away as her friend stared at him in awe and the younger girl's cheeks began to glow pink with a light blush.

'Good for you, Chizuru...' Sumiko thought sincerely.

"..."

Chizuru seemed to still be in a bit of a daze as she and Sumiko walked back outside with Sen and Kimigiku to see them off. Sen exchanged a knowing smile with Sumiko as they turned to glance back at her.

"Say, could the person you care about be...?" Sen began to ask Chizuru.

"Eh? Uh, no! Um..." Chizuru said nervously, blushing shyly after being caught in her crush. "I-I just thought I'd like to stay by the Shinsengumi's side, to help them out, if I can..."

"Aw, Chizuru, you're so cute!" Sumiko exclaimed, grinning as she hugged her younger friend. Sen smiled as well and glanced up at the sky.

"They say one of my ancestors fell in love with a human and followed them to the capital. No matter the time or circumstances, women are powerless in the face of love, aren't they?" She said.

"Osen-chan..." Chizuru said softly.

"Yeah, I guess that's true..." Sumiko said with a wan smile. "But love can also make the powerless strong. People can do incredible

things in the name of love." Sen and Chizuru smiled at that.

"There you go, saying cool things again, Sumiko-san! I'm starting to wish you were a man." Sen said wryly.

"Not you, too!" Sumiko said, hanging her head with a sigh. Chizuru and Sen smiled and let out a little laugh.

"Hime-sama, we must be going." Kimigiku whispered when she sensed several people approaching.

"We have to go, Chizuru-chan, Sumiko-san." Sen said, taking one of each of their hands in her own. "Let's meet again sometime."

"Yeah. Take care of yourselves." Sumiko said with a small smile.

"Thank you, Osen-chan." Chizuru said, looking as though she were about to tear up. The two girls looked away for a moment when they heard a group of men approaching. Just as the men started to come into view from around the corner, they felt Sen's grip on their hands loosen, they wanted to look back at her as this happened, but by the time they finished turning their heads back to them, Sen and Kimigiku were already gone in a rush of wind and whirl of leaves. The girls stared at the empty space before them in amazement while the men passed behind them, totally clueless.

"! Okay. If that's an oni thing, we have \_got \_to learn how to do that." Sumiko said with an appreciative smile.

"!^!"

Meanwhile, Kondo was on his way back from the castle with the others. Despite their caution, they failed to notice the rifleman hiding in the thick bamboo forest alongside the road.

\_BANG!\_

It happened so fast Kondo didn't even realize he had been shot until he realized he was about to fall off his horse after being knocked off balance by the force of the bullet, and a searing pain started burning fiercely in his shoulder. There was red everywhere. His formal garments and the saddle were being stained crimson by his blood.

\_"Commander!"\_ Kondo heard Shimada cry out to him as he lost consciousness.

#### 40. Silver Bullet

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 40: Silver Bullet<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>By the time Shimada returned with their injured commander, Kondo

was already in such a serious condition that both Sumiko and Yamazaki had felt the need to team up and collaborate with each other in order to save his life.<p>

"At this rate, it will continue to bleed." Yamazaki said grimly while they worked together to apply as much pressure as possible to the gunshot wound in a futile attempt to staunch the blood flow. They didn't even have the time to give the suffering man a pain killer. Every second counted now. "We're cauterizing it." He said, glancing over at Chizuru, who was waiting on standby to assist with the preparation of tools and medicine.

"Hai." Chizuru said, about to about to fetch a hibachi to heat the implements with, when Sumiko stopped her.

"No. If we cauterize the wound, there's a chance we could miss some of the smaller blood vessels, and they'll continue to bleed inside the burned skin." Sumiko stated firmly, furrowing her brow.

"But if we do nothing, the commander will die." Yamazaki said urgently, furrowing his brow.

"Don't worry. Kondo-san ain't dying today. There's a better way." Sumiko replied calmly. "Chizuru, bring me the jar from the bottom left drawer of my tansu that has a shrimp painted on it. We'll close the wound with that."

"Hai." Chizuru said, immediately fetching the jar and placing it in her outstretched hand. Sumiko broke the wax seal on the jar and brushed Yamazaki's hands aside so she could pour its the powdered contents over the wound.

"Gaah!" Kondo screamed in pain as she grabbed a clean cloth and pressed the powder firmly into the wound.

"Hold him down! We need him to stay still so the powder can settle into the wound properly!" She shouted as she struggled to hold Kondo down with the help of Yamazaki and Chizuru.

"Commander!" Saito said as he and Sano rushed over to help hold him down.

"Kondo-san!" Sano said earnestly. "What are you doing to him!\_?"

"Forcing the blood to clot. The powder I just applied is a homemade hemostat. It has a heavy concentration of chitosan and its salts, which act as an anti-hemorrhagic." She explained as Kondo began to stop fighting and settle down. Sumiko removed her hands and left the cloth stuck to Kondo's chest. She didn't want to disturb the large scab that was already forming.

"The bleedingâ€| has stopped!" Yamazaki said, amazed.

"Hey, what's that miracle powder made from?" Sano asked as they stared down at the closed wound in awe.

"Hm? The crushed shells of crustaceans mostly." Sumiko replied as she wiped the sweat from her brow. History may not be her best subject, but Sumiko had always been an undisputed champion when it came to

tackling chemistry and biology.

"A-Amazingâ€¦ I had no ideaâ€¦" Yamazaki said, staring at her in awe.

"I'll give you the recipe later. Anyway, we still have to get the bullet out." Sumiko said, frowning.

"Eh? It's still in there\_!\_?" Sano asked. It looked like it had gone straight through since there was both an entry and exit wound.

"The bullet actually shattered when it hit Kondo-san. Even though we were able to take most of it out, there's still a fragment left in there. We'll have to take it out of course, but with Kondo-san losing so much blood, stopping that became more a priority." She explained. "If we kept the wound open any longer, he could have died. And I don't want to open him up again while he's still suffering from such major blood loss. As it is, we'll have a hard time keeping him from slipping into a comaâ€¦ I wish I could give him a blood transfusion, but I don't have the equipment for that, and we'd need to find a donor first."

"Hold up. Blood transfusion?" Sano asked dubiously.

"It's just how it sounds. It's a process where you take blood from a healthy person and put it in the patient to replenish the amount of blood they've lost to a more stable level. But it has to be the right blood type, or Kondo-san's immune system will attack it, and he could end up dying from that. I can start doing a simple test to make sure his blood won't reject the donor's, but first we have to eliminate anyone who might have an illness that could be transferred along with their blood. Even if they look healthy, they could still be a hidden carrier for certain thingsâ€¦ I'll have to review the health logs for the troops." Sumiko said thoughtfully.

"Yukimura-kun and I can do that. Just tell us what to look for." Yamazaki said.

"What else do you need?" Saito asked.

"If possible, I'd like to get my hands on that medicine the rasetsu use to suppress their bloodlust." Sumiko said, surprising them all.

"What?" Sano asked, furrowing his brow.

"Relax." She said before they could get any more worked up. "It helps suppress their bloodlust because it imitates the nutrients in blood, right? If so, then it can be used to help treat Kondo-san's anemia to a certain extent, too."

"I'll be right back." Saito said as he got up and left to get some medicine from San'nan-san. Yamazaki and Sumiko began applying a proper dressing to Kondo's wound.

"The war council at Nijo Castle was finished," Shimada continued, explaining how the terrible crisis came about to Hijikata and Inoue while the others worked desperately to save Kondo, "and on the way back to the magistrate's office he was suddenly shot."

"You brought him back here like that on horse?" Hijikata asked.

"Yes. If he'd fallen from his horse, he could have succumbed to his injury. I'm very sorry." Shimada said regretfully, bowing deeply. "I couldn't protect the commander!"

"No." Hijikata said tiredly, closing his eyes. "Kondo-san insisted he needed no guard, but his protection was lacking. Being able to persuade him otherwise, the fault is mine." He said grimly.

"Vice-commander." Yamazaki said as he approached them, wiping the blood off his hands. "Tonight will be the worst of it." The four men glanced across the room and watched while Sumiko gently elevated Kondo's head and carefully administered the faux blood nutrients that Saito had returned with, mixed with water, to Kondo-san with help from Chizuru. Tonight would decide whether Kondo lived or died, whether he would slip into a coma or not.

They didn't notice when Okita watching everything while hiding behind the shoji.

"Kh!" Okita winced as he leaned against the wall for support while staggering back to his room. "Nngh!" He grunted in pain when he fell to his knees, but he grit his teeth and pulled himself to open the door and enter. "Ah-ung!" He fell to the floor and crawled over to his futon, where he had left his swords lying on the floor, covered in a sheen of cold sweat as he forced his trembling arms and legs to keep moving while he reached for his sword. They were going to pay for this, the people who hurt Kondo-san! Okita closed his hand around his long sword and used it to brace himself as he struggled to get back on his feet, but his sick body refused to listen. "Ungh!" Okita groaned and gasped in pain as he fell and sat back on his heels, unable to get past a kneeling position.

"No matter how much I want to kill who did this, I can't even wield a sword, huh?" He said bitterly, berating himself for having fallen into such a pathetic state while Kondo's life was in danger. Hadn't he decided long ago that he would always follow and protect Kondo-san for the kindness he had shown to a brat like him, back when everyone else was against him!\_? When did he become so pathetic? All he was ever good at was killing, and now he couldn't even do that! Okita pulled the vial of Ochimizu out of his sleeve and stared at it. Nagumo Kaoru's words from that time floated through his mind.

\_Are you able to fight?\_

"I can! fight!" Okita said determinedly with a fierce gleam in his eye as sweat dripped down his pale face. He removed the stopper and quickly downed the entire contents of the vial. "!" Okita the empty vial fell from Okita's hands as he clutched at his burning throat and fell forward onto his futon, curling into a fetal position from the immense pain of the transformation taking place within the very cells of his entire body. "Ugh!" He grit his teeth as his hair began to fade to white, and his eyes shot wide open as they began to glow that eerie rasetsu red.

“あゝ”

BANG!

Chizuru and Sumiko, who were now outside by the well, getting cleaned up and drawing water to boil and clean the surgical tools with, looked up when they heard the sound of a gunshot echo loudly through the night.

BANG!

BANG!

"!" Both girls shuddered when an eerie sensation of dread suddenly washed over them. It wasn't the gunfire. \_It was something else entirely\_â€|

"What's that?" Chizuru wondered aloud nervously.

"You felt it, too?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow. There was something dangerous nearby. It felt similar to the foreboding sensation that had awoken them the night that rogue rasetsu broke into their room and attacked themâ€|

They both turned when they heard the sound of running footsteps fast approaching them.

\_FLASH.\_

Sumiko's eyes widened in shock as a figure streaked across the gap between the buildings a few yards ahead, heading for the gate leading out to the city. She recognized that silhouette. His hair was pulled up in the same style as always, but now it was white, and his eyes flashed red in the dark.

"Did you justâ€| was thatâ€|" Sumiko struggled to ask, not wanting to believe her eyes.

"Okita-san!\_?" Chizuru gasped, alarmed. The two girls exchanged a worried glance before quickly dropping what they were doing to run after him.

"Ah!" They both gasped in surprise when they had to skid to halt in order to avoid colliding with San'nan and Heisuke, who were on their way out for a night patrol.

"Please calm yourselves." San'nan told the girls.

"They're just trying to rile us up." Heisuke said, thinking it was the gunshots that had them wound up.

"It's not that!" Sumiko corrected them. She was relieved to see them actually, as rasetsu, they might be able to help them bring Okita back more easily than Hijikata and the others.

"Okita-san just went out on his own!" Chizuru said anxiously as she turned and ran after him without thinking.

"Ah! Chizuru!" Sumiko shouted, immediately taking off after her reckless friend.

"Wait!" Heisuke shouted as he chased after both girls. "Chizuru!



Sumiko!"

"Toudou-kun!" San'nan said, though he made no move to follow them. Now was not the time to be running around blindly. Didn't they realize it could be a trap?

â€"â^žâ€"

BANG!

The rifleman and his pals smirked as they loaded another round and prepared to fire again.

"Ah?" He said, glancing up when he heard the sound of footsteps approaching them. They smirked when they saw the blue haori of a Shinsengumi member. "Henh. He fell for it!" He took aim at the approaching man and fired.

BANGâ€"\_ZHNG!\_

In an instant, Okita drew his sword and deflected the bullet with its blade.

"What the hell is he!\_?" The rifle man exclaimed, agitated and unnerved by the inhuman display of dexterity. He and his comrades all drew their swords and took up a defensive stance as Okita drew closer and stepped out from the shadow of the row of buildings into the bright moonlight.

"Are you the ones?" He asked dangerously, glaring at them with glowing red eyes. "The ones who shot Kondo-san, that is." A bead of nervous sweat rolled down the side of the rifleman's face.

"Uh, aaah!" He yelled, charging at Okita when his 'fight or flight' instinct kicked in. Okita narrowed his eyes. Wrong choice.

\_SLICE.\_

In one swift motion, Okita decapitated the man with a one handed-swing of his blade. His sword slid through the man's throat like warm butter. The rifleman's comrades stared in horror as a blood spurted high into the air and gushed from the dead man's neck like a fountain as his body fell to the ground.

"Dammit! Now you've done it!" One of them shouted as two men ran forward to avenge their friend.

\_SLASH! SLICE!\_

"Ughhâ€|" The two men groaned as they fell to the ground dead. They never had a chance. They had been cut down instantly at such a speed, the two attacks appeared to have occurred simultaneously.

!" The remaining men gasped as they took a nervous step back and began to break out in a nervous sweat. This guy was no ordinary swordsmanâ€| He was a monster!

Okita continued forward, drawing a short sword from the hip of one his felled foes as he passed.

\_SWISH.\_

"Agh!\_?" one of the men gasped in surprise and pain when, with the flick of a wrist, Okita threw the short sword with enough force to spear him to the wall behind him.

"Ah!" The last one trembled as he stood alone to face Okita. "Yaaah!" Okita simply deflected his blade and stabbed him through the throat, barely even pausing on his way over to finish off the guy he had pinned to the wall. The man on the wall was still alive and groaning miserably as he hung there like a fly that had been pinned to a board for display. Okita yanked the sword out from the wall and let the man fall to the ground with a harsh thud before finishing him off.

"Aagh!" The man cried out in his death throes. Okita paused and turned when he felt someone approaching him from behind.

"Nagumo Kaoru." Okita said, frowning, as he took in his latest opponent's appearance. Though Kaoru was now wearing male clothing and the long hair had been cut, the face was still the same. "Was it you who shot Kondo-san?" Okita asked, narrowing his eyes dangerously at the cross-dresser.

"You drank the Ochimizu, didn't you?" Kaoru asked as Okita stalked towards him. Kaoru smirked. "To make Okita, praised as Shinsengumi's greatest swordsman, into a rasetzu is an honor."

"Just answer the question." Okita said coldly, pointing his sword at him.

"You have no proof, yet you doubt \_me\_?" Kaoru asked sardonically. Such gratitude. "Incidentally, those men were former Guardians of the Imperial Tomb. As much as they longed to avenge Itou Kashitaro, they lacked the courage to raid the magistrate's office. Maybe I advised them to lay in wait by the roadside."

"Keh!" Okita furrowed his brow and grit his teeth as he glared fiercely at Nagumo Kaoru. He didn't care what this brat's relationship was to Chizuru. \_He was going to kill him.\_

"Oh, dear. It's not as if I did it out of spite." Kaoru said mockingly with feigned concern. "Still, for the commander of the Shinsengumi to be that careless—" Okita's hand trembled with anger as he tightened his grip on his sword. "I wouldn't have dreamed it possible." Kaoru finished with a devious smirk.

\_CLANG!\_

Okita instantly shot forward and their two swords crashed together when Kaoru managed to block him.

"What are you after?" Okita demanded.

"Do you know what I've suffered since being taken in by the Nagumo family?" Kaoru asked him. His voice trembled with anger. He deflected Okita's sword and jumped back to put some distance between them as he continued to speak. "I've been the subject of humiliation, simply for not being a female oni. Meanwhile, Chizuru completely forgot about

me, her older brother, and is treated as a comrade, even protected, by the humans that wiped out our family! To be unable to protect that which is dear, to be protected by no one, to not even know why you live! I want my cute little sister to experience this, the same suffering that I have!" He declared scornfully with a manic look in his wide, brown eyes.

"Hmph. How sad for you." Okita remarked derisively as he smirked and narrowed his eyes while he continued to glare at the crazy oni. The may be twins, but he was about as different from Chizuru as night from day. Chizuru would never be so pathetic to have to make others miserable in order to feel better about herself or blame her hardships on others.

"!" Kaoru said as he twitched and grit his teeth, detesting the look of superiority in Okita's eyes. "By the way, I lied." He said, quickly recovering when he remembered he still had an ace hidden up his sleeve. "That Ochimizu won't cure your tuberculosis.

"!" Okita grit his teeth and furrowed his brow, clearly shaken by the news. However, he quickly reminded himself that even if that were the case, he could at least still fight for now. He inched forward, preparing to attack.

"Okita-san!" Chizuru called out when she spotted him, alerting them to her presence as she ran down the street towards them.

"Chizuru, wait!" Sumiko shouted as she and Heisuke chased after her.

Kaoru wasted no time in leaping up and out of the way, landing on the roof of the building above. Okita furrowed his brow as he followed the oni's movements, wondering what he was trying to pull.

"Okita-san!" Chizuru called.

"Souji!" Heisuke shouted.

"Okita Souji, you are \_so \_much trouble!" Sumiko started to scold him, looking furious. "Angry grizzly bears are going to look tame next to what's waiting for you at home!"

"Chizuru-chan." Okita said as he watched them approach, ignoring Sumiko's ominous threat. He glanced back up at Kaoru and followed the oni's gaze to see what he was looking at. "!" There were two more riflemen set up in another alley between him and the others. They were aiming for Chizuru, who was ahead of the other two. "Look out!" He shouted anxiously, springing forward.

\_BANG! \_

\_BANG!\_

"Ah!" Chizuru and the others gasped and their eyes widened in horror as they skidded to a halt. Okita had thrown himself at the riflemen so that he was standing right in front of them, taking both shots at point blank range.

"!" The riflemen gasped as they stared up at the white-haired and

red-eyed man who was still standing and glaring fiercely at them despite having just been shot twice. Was he some kind of monster!\_?

"Shit! Let's go!" one of them shouted as they both scrambled away anxiously and ran off with their tails between their legs.

"Okita-san!" Chizuru screamed as she, Sumiko, and Heisuke ran over to him.

"Okita!" Sumiko cried out in alarm as he started to fall to his knees.

"Souji!" Heisuke quickly slid over to catch Okita and break his fall.

"What a fool. Still, I thought Okita might protect you." Kaoru commented as he observed them from above, smirking. "Chizuru! you will suffer even more." He disappeared just as Sumiko glanced up in his direction.

'Was it just my imagination? She wondered, furrowing her brow as a bead of nervous sweat slid down the side of her face. She could've sworn she sensed someone else there!

"Souji! you became a rasetsu?" Heisuke asked the unconscious Okita grimly, furrowing his brow.

"Okita-san! Why?" Chizuru cried.

"We'll find that out later. First, we have to get him back for medical treatment. He might be a rasetsu, but these bullet wounds are no joke." Sumiko said determinedly. "Let's go."

"Hai!" Chizuru and Heisuke agreed.

~~~~~

Okita lay beside Kondo now. They were both being kept in the same room to make it easier to monitor their health over night since they were both in critical condition.

"It's strange." San'nan said as he walked over to Hijikata and Inoue, carrying the small tray containing the bullets Sumiko had removed from Okita, while she finished wiping the blood from the surgery off of her hands. "Now that he's a rasetsu, extracting the bullets should make the wound heal." Was it because of his illness?

"What are those bullets?" Hijikata asked, furrowing his brow. "They aren't lead." They were too bright and shiny for that.

"No." San'nan agreed.

"They're silver." Sumiko said, causing them to glance at her. "I bet that's why his wound isn't healing. In European legends, it's said a magic silver bullet can be used to kill vampires and werewolves, legendary creatures that seem to share many common traits with our rasetsu: varying degrees of photosensitivity, being more active at night, drinking blood, enhanced strength and healing abilities, and

now an added weakness against silver. The similarities are starting to really pile up. It's giving me the chills. They were said to be monsters, but now I'm beginning to think they were humans who drank some version of the Elixir, the Western version of the Ochimizu." She said, furrowing her brow.

"You're saying you believe in magic now?" San'nan asked, raising an eyebrow. He never thought he would hear that from someone as scientifically minded as Sumiko.

"No way." She said with a wry smile. "I think everything in this world has a natural and scientific explanation, even if somethings are still beyond our current scope understanding. They probably just began to think the bullets were magic since they could bring down something that normally couldn't be killed by any other means. It's rare, but normal humans can have a silver allergy, too. The thing that sets it off isn't the silver itself, but the nickel in it. I think this is what's happening to Okita. He's having an allergic reaction to the nickel in the bullets, so his wounds can't heal properly because his immune system has received a shock and is in a panic. I can try making him a mild antihistamine, which will help ease the symptoms of the allergy, but I don't know how much help it'll be in speeding up the recovery of his woundsâ€¦ I wish I had some hydrocortisone to give him tooâ€¦" She said, frowning as she glanced back at the unconscious Okita and furrowed her brow. "He'll probably need a blood transfusion as well. He hasn't lost as much blood as Kondo-san, but since rasetsu naturally need more blood than regular humans, it may help him heal faster. I really wish I had brought more of my equipment from our clinic in Edoâ€¦ Well, I'll figure something out. As it is, I'll need lots of help with the intensive care I'm going to have to provide for our two patients."

"At this rate, our only choice is to have Matsumoto-sensei help you treat them both." Hijikata said after a moment. Osaka was much closer than Edo. Hopefully Matsumoto-sensei would have the necessary equipment with him.

"Huh?" Chizuru said as both of the girls and Yamazaki glanced up at him.

"Hai." Yamazaki agreed, nodding in understanding. He thought that was an excellent idea.

"We'll be taking them to Osaka Castle." Hijikata stated decisively.

Two days later, Kondo-san and Okita-san were taken to Osaka for treatment. It was fourteen days before the outbreak of the Battle of Toba-Fushimi.

#### 41. Call to arms

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 41: Call to Arms<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh, good. You're awake." Sumiko said when Okita finally opened his eyes again the day after they arrived at the Osaka Castle. Okita blinked in confusion as he took in his change of surroundings and tried to sit up. "Not so fast!" She scolded him, gently forcing him to lie back down.<p>

"What happened?" He asked groggily. "Kondo-sanâ€| Chizuruâ€|?"

"They're both fine." She reassured him with a smile before adopting a sterner expression. "And way better off than you! What the hell were you thinking, becoming a rasetu\_!\_?"

"I was thinking it might cure my illness and let me kill the guys who shot Kondo-san." He replied frankly. "But as it turns out, the part about it being a cure was a lie."

"Well, duh." Sumiko deadpanned after a heavy sigh. "\_I\_ could've told you that, if you had bothered to ask. The Ochimizu only enhances your body's natural ability to heal. The problem with your illness is that it's being caused by a really malignant bacteria that's taken up residence in your lungs. Until that's gone, you'll never get better. The only reason you can move around now is because the Ochimizu enabled your body to keep up with damage being caused by the bacteria better. I'm afraid all you did was prolong your own sufferingâ€|" She said regretfully. He was still dying, just at a much slower rate. "Where did you even get the stuff anyway? Because I know it wasn't from San'nan-san."

"Nagumo Kaoru paid me a visit." Okita replied, furrowing his brow as his expression darkened.

"Nagumoâ€| you mean Chizuru's look-a-like?" Sumiko asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, and you won the bet about his gender." Okita told her. "That kid came to my room one night several months ago, going on about how he was Chizuru's twin, and he gave me a vial Ochimizu claiming that he received it from Koudou-san, and that it would cure my illnessâ€| and then he showed up again tonight with those guys. It was \_him.\_ He's the one who told them how to ambush Kondo-san!" He said angrily, clenching his fists, as he glared up at the ceiling. "Sumiko-san. You have to watch out for Chizuru-chan. That guy's determined to make his younger sister suffer."

Sumiko frowned and furrowed her brow as she closed her eyes. It figuredâ€| when it rained, it poured.

"Yeah, don't worry. Leave Chizuru to me. As soon as I feel comfortable doing so, I'll leave you and Kondo-san in Matsumoto-sensei's care and rush back to meet with her and the others." She said solemnly. "But, on a happier note, Kondo-san is also up and asking about you." She added with a sly smile. "He asked me to give you a good scolding for him for giving everyone a scare like that once you woke up."

"You wouldn'tâ€|" He said, narrowing his eyes as a feeling of dread began to creep over him.

"That's right! It's plenty of green onion, leek, and bak choi soup for you!" She said with a cheeky grin. Aside from the fact that she knew he hated them, they had the added benefit of being very nutritious.

"I'll kill you!" Okita muttered darkly as she got up to leave and prepare his punishment meal.

"That's a good attitude." She said smirking. "You should hate me more, curse me more, and detest me! Then you should take the power of that hatred and use it to survive in this rotten world!" She continued, quoting Gin-san from Gintama in his parody of Itachi from Naruto as she slipped out of the room, leaving behind a somewhat bewildered Okita, who didn't get the reference at all. Of course, the priceless expression on his face just made it all the more amusing for Sumiko.

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**\*\*January, 1868\*\***

Conflict began between the former Bakufu army and the Satsuma and Choshu armies. It was what the world would call the Battle of Toba-Fushimi.

It was 15,000 former Bakufu army soldiers versus 5,000 Satcho soldiers. In sheer numbers, the former Bakufu army had a major advantage. However, faced with the modern weaponry of the Satcho forces, the former Bakufu army was utterly defeated. Because Kondo-san was still recuperating in Osaka after being taken there for treatment for the gunshot wound he'd received, Hijikata had assumed leadership of the Shinsengumi, and he had decided to attack the enemy's headquarters at Gokounomyia Shrine. It was just in time for this battle that Sumiko returned to the Shinsengumi as a medic. While she performed surgery on major wounds in the back, Chizuru helped take care of the soldiers being brought in with more minor wounds in the front.

"The bleeding has stopped." Chizuru informed the soldier whose arm she had just finished bandaging. "Please try to stay conscious." She gasped when she heard the sound of another great explosion in the distance where the other were still out fighting.

"Yukimura-kun. Are you all right?" Inoue asked as he walked over to check on her.

"I'm worried whether everyone will make it back safely." Chizuru replied quietly, bowing her head. Inoue placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Not to worry. They're warriors." He reassured her. "In the face of overwhelming odds, Nagakura-kun and Shimada-kun volunteered for the suicide corps. Harada-kun put his own life on the line to provide them with support" and Saito has headed for Ryu'un Temple to stop their cannons. They are all true warriors, a rarity in this modern world."

"True warriors?" Chizuru asked.

"That's right." Sumiko said as she walked up to them, wiping off her bloody hands. "Have faith, Chizuru. Believe in them. They'll be back." She added with a tired smile.

"Hai." Chizuru said as she and Inoue smiled.

"Vice-commander!" They heard Yamazaki gasp outside. "Are you all right?" The three of them exchanged a glance and immediately went to see what was up.

"Yamazaki. Tend to his wounds." Hijikata said as he walked up slowly, carefully supporting another injured man.

"Yes, sir." Yamazaki replied dutifully, taking the other man away from treatment.

"Hijikata-san!" Chizuru said as they came rushing over to see him. "You're bleeding!" She gasped in alarm when she saw the cut on the back of his hand.

"You need medical attention." Sumiko said, turning to go back and get some bandages and disinfectant.

"It's just a scratch." Hijikata said as he glanced down at his bleeding hand.

"Don't say 'just a scratch' when it's bleeding so profusely!" Sumiko snapped sternly. "You need to take better care!"

BOOM!

The whole ground shook and dust fell from the ceiling of the porch with the force of another explosion that wasn't too far away. It felt like they were getting closer.

"Dammit, they're really hitting us hard." Hijikata commented, furrowing his brow.

"Saito-san! Harada-san!" Chizuru gasped as they came limping up with what was left of their men.

"Vice-commander. I'm very sorry." Saito apologized humbly with regret. "Their gunfire was just too intense. We couldn't fight our way into Ryu'un Temple."

"I see." Hijikata said. He was disappointed, but he didn't blame Saito. They were being completely outgunned all around.

"Shinpachi!" Sano said, alarmed, when he didn't see his friend anywhere. "Has Shinpachi not returned yet!?" He asked anxiously.

"No." Inoue informed him regretfully. Sano furrowed his brow and looked down at the ground, clearly distressed by the news.

"Don't worry, Sano-san. Shinpachi-san's the kind of guy who won't die even if you kill him." Sumiko said, trying to reassure him. "He'll probably outlive us all."

"Yeah!" Sano replied quietly, not looking too convinced. Shinpachi



and Shimada had gone on a suicide mission, after all.

“”

"The guns the Satcho army has have a frighteningly long rang." Saito reported once they had all gathered for a meeting after Sumiko and Chizuru finished dressing their wounds. "Even from great distances, one of every two shots is on target."

"What's more, they're placed up high, and aim for groups of us at a time." Sano added.

"Oh no! So, Nagakura-san and Shimada-san are!" Chizuru said sadly, glancing around at the others, hoping someone would correct her. Hijikata closed his eyes and bowed his head.

"Fine." Sumiko said firmly, surprising them. "They'll be fine! Just you watch. That muscle-head is too dumb to die."

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru said.

"Yo!" A familiar called out, arriving right on cue. "We're back." Shinpachi said as he and Shimada leaned around the door to peek into the room at them.

"Welcome back." Sumiko greeted them with a smile, grateful for their timing.

"Nagakura-san! Shimada-san!" Chizuru exclaimed, amazed.

"Shinpachi!" Sano said, astonished.

"The heck? We ain't ghost." Shinpachi remarked upon seeing the stunned looks on everyone but Sumiko's faces. "We're not floatin' on air. We've still got out feet." He added, stepping out into full view to prove his point.

"Thank goodness!" Chizuru exclaimed while they all smiled and let out a sigh of relief.

"Well, that was a failure." Shinpachi said, sighing heavily as he and Shimada took a seat. "The enemy shot a hailstorm of gunfire at us. There's no way we could've fought our way into their headquarters. Thanks to that!" He clenched his fists. "Most of my men were led to death." They paused for a brief moment of silence for the dead.

BOOM!

They all glanced outside at the sound of another explosion and noticed there were some wisps of black smoke creeping into the courtyard.

"It looks like the fire has spread." Shinpachi commented, furrowing his brow.

"Toshi-san." Inoue said as they all turned to glance back at Hijikata expectantly, waiting to hear his orders.

"This is no longer an era of swords and spears." Hijikata said as he picked up his own and held it in his hand. He was gripping it so tightly, the cut on his hand reopened, forming a crimson stain in the center of the white bandages. "We're retreating." He ordered, furrowing his brow. "But we haven't lost yet. They will definitely pay for this." He stated determinedly. "Once the sun goes down, we'll send out the Rasetsu Unit and change location. Also, dispatch someone to Yodo Castle to ask for support."

'Yodo castle!' Sumiko thought. The name rung a bell. 'Didn't they defect to the Imperial side?' They were going to have to be careful about how they approached this

"I'll go!" Chizuru immediately volunteered.

"Chizuru" Sumiko said, furrowing her brow with concern.

"You?" Hijikata asked, also concerned.

"Everyone else is exhausted." Chizuru said seriously. "Please rest until it's time to move. I will go send word. Please let me do something, too!"

"If you're that determined, I'll go with you." Sumiko said with a sigh.

"You can't go. You're our main medic." Hijikata reminded her. "If something happens"

"Hijikata-san. Do you know how many men have died on my operating table in the last hour alone? If I have to stay trapped back there any longer, I'll scream." Sumiko stated rigidly, frowning as she furrowed her brow at him. "I'm going with Chizuru."

"Sumiko-san" Chizuru said sadly. That's right Sumiko had been doing her best all alone back there, which also meant she had to watch the men she couldn't save die while she was all by herself

"I'll go with them." Inoue said.

"Are you sure, Inoue-san?" Sumiko asked, concerned. She couldn't remember how or when he was supposed to die

Inoue smiled and nodded.

"Very well." Hijikata relented. "We're counting on you."

## 42. Beyond the Clash of Arms

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 42: Beyond the Clash of Arms<strong>

\* \* \*

<p>"Do you think they'll send any support troops?" Chizuru asked as

the three of them ran to Yodo Castle together, cutting through a bamboo thicket.<p>

"No." Sumiko answered honestly, furrowing her brow. "But we've gotta try, right?"

"We'll have to make them do so." Inoue said determinedly. "For Toshi-san's sake. I don't want to see his face like that again."

"Yeahâ€|" Sumiko agreed sadly, knowing this would only be the start of their troubles.

â€"â^žâ€"

"Why are the castle gates closed?" Chizuru asked when they finally arrived, only to find the castle completely closed up.

Sumiko frowned and furrowed her brow. This was bad. They were too late...!

"We've come with an official order!" Inoue declared bravely, taking a step forward. "We wish to ask for your help to fight insurgents who would draw arms against the emperor!"

"Ah. Over there!" Chizuru said when she spotted someone watching them from the second level. Sumiko's eyes widened when she saw the rifle in the man's hands.

"Sniper!" She cried as he took aim, helping Inoue shove Chizuru to safety, as he shouted:

"Look out!"

BANG!

They just barely missed being nicked by the bullet that had been shot at them.

"Sumiko-san! Inoue-san! This isâ€"

"Let's go back. It's dangerous here." Inoue said regretfully, furrowing his brow as he grit his teeth.

"But our reservesâ€|" Chizuru said.

"We won't find any here." Sumiko said grimly.

"Eh?" Chizuru gasped.

"They are no longer our allies." Inoue explained.

"But at this rate, what about Hijikata-san?" She asked nervously. "What will happen to the Shinsengumi? Ah!" Chizuru gasped when Inoue and Sumiko each grabbed the stubborn girl by one of her wrists and started hauling ass together, dragging her away to safety. "Sumiko-san! Inou-san!"

BANG!

Again, they narrowly managed to avoid taking a direct hit. Sumiko winced when she felt the bullet whizz by her ear, like a rabid bumblebee, but she didn't stop. She and Inoue continued to run, knowing their lives depended on it.

"Inoue-san! Sumiko-san!" Chizuru shouted, still trying to resist.

"That's enough!" Inoue snapped angrily, surprising the girls, as he suddenly stopped and rounded on Chizuru. "I, too, wish to return with reinforcements for Toshi-san!"

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped, realizing her mistake when she saw the looks on his and Sumiko's faces.

"Inoue-san!" Sumiko said. Inoue closed his eyes and loosened his grip on Chizuru. He hadn't meant to snap at her like that.

"But I also have a duty to protect you." He added more kindly, placing a gentle hand on the young girl's shoulder. "If something were to happen to you, there's no way I could face Toshi-san."

"That's right." Sumiko said with a small smile. "And if Yodo Castle is full of enemies, that's something Hijikata-san needs to know as well." They couldn't warn him if they were dead.

"I'm sorry, Inoue!" Chizuru said quietly, looking down.

"What's this? We're talking about Toshi-san. He's sure to think of some plan to turn things around." Inoue said, smiling kindly as he patted Chizuru on the head.

With that settled, they continued to retreat back to regroup with the others.

"The rendezvous point is just past this forest." Inoue said as the ran together towards the setting sun.

"Ah, there's someone there." Sumiko said when she spotted three silhouettes standing in the middle of the road up ahead. The sun was behind them, so it was difficult to see their faces.

"It's Hijikata-san and the others." Chizuru said hopefully just as Sumiko's eyes widened in horror when she realized the figures were aiming guns at them.

"Nooo!" Sumiko shouted, pushing herself out in front to shield the others as they pulled the triggers.

\_BANG!\_

"Ngh!" Sumiko cried out in pain as she fell to her knees. Both shots had been fired simultaneously—one bullet hit in her shoulder, and the other pierced her lung, hitting dangerously close to her heart.

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru cried as she and Inoue both reached out to support her as she struggled to breathe while coughing up blood.

"You bastards! You're of the Bakufu army!" Inoue shouted, glaring angrily at them.

"Hey, that's the Shinsengumi's outfit." One of the men said after taking a better look at Inoue's haori.

"Yeah. If we take his head as a trophy, Satcho will greet us kindly." Another said, drawing his sword.

"Oh no!" Chizuru gasped, appalled.

"Get out of here, Yukimura-kun. Take Miyagawa-san and run." Inoue said as he stepped forward to fight and buy them some time to escape.

"Inoue-san!" Chizuru said.

"D-Don't be ridiculous! you know I can't run like this." Sumiko told him through labored breath as a bead of sweat rolled down the side of her face. She was loosing blood at a dangerous rate and having trouble breathing just sitting there. "If anyone should stay behind as a distraction, it should be!"

"No!" Inoue said firmly as he began to draw his sword. "Please, tell Toshi-san! I'm sorry my strength wasn't enough. I want him to forgive me for not being there until the end." Tears began to steam down the girls' faces as they watched his resolved back, and they realized nothing they could say or do would change his mind. He was determined to stay and fight to protect them, even if meant sacrificing himself. "And to know that I'm eternally grateful for him showing me that final dream."

"I can't! Inoue-san!" Sumiko cried as she finally remembered too late that this was the day he was supposed to die.

"No! Let's escape, together!" Chizuru pleaded, grabbing onto his arm.

"Hurry up and go!" He said sternly, shaking her off. "Miyagawa-san will die if you don't get her help!"

"Inoue-san!" Chizuru cried as he let out a war cry and charged at their three enemies with his sword raised.

"Die, you fool!" They shouted as they drew their swords and all three of them charged forward at once, surrounding him. While Inoue was facing one from the front, another snuck up and stabbed in the back.

"Inoue-san!" Chizuru screamed as the other two then stabbed him through the side and front.

"Hah!" Inoue breathed shakily as he tried to raise his sword again, but his wounds were too great. He collapsed onto the ground. Tears streamed down Chizuru's face as she took a step back, horrified, almost tripping over Sumiko, who was already on the verge of fainting from blood loss. She didn't even have the energy to scream or cry anymore.

"Hurry! Run, Yukimura-kun!" Inoue gasped desperately, reaching

out with his last breath as he watched the three deserters stalk towards the two girls before his vision faded to black.

Chizuru sobbed, glaring at the approaching men, as she leaned down and struggled to get Sumiko onto her feet, pulling the older girl's arm over her shoulder.

"To double-cross him just because you don't like the side he's on? Can you really call yourselves warriors?" Chizuru asked angrily as hot tears streamed down her face. She wished she could draw her sword against them, but she had her hands full with trying to keep Sumiko up as she backed away from them.

"Are we really warriors?" One of them asked. "Of course we are." He replied, smirking.

"No." Chizuru said. "I have witnessed true warriors. You all aren't worthy of being called warriors!"

"We're not worthy of being warriors?" The man asked incredulously, pointing his blade at her. "Now you've said it!" He stepped forward, raising his sword to strike.

SWISH. \_SLASH!\_ \_STAB! SLASH!\_

The men screamed as they all fell to the ground, dead. Kazama gave his sword a sharp swing to shake the blood from his blade.

"Scum." He cursed, furrowing his brow and frowning as he stared down at their corpses in distaste.

"Kazama-san!" Chizuru said, stunned. He glanced up at her with sharp crimson eyes. His pupils constricted when he saw the state Sumiko was in.

"Oi. You awake, komainu?" He asked, causing Chizuru to glance at her as well.

"Sumiko-san?!" Chizuru's eyes widened in shock as she gasped. Her friend's hair was snow white, like a rasetrus, but Sumiko's deep, dark eyes were now a beautiful, warm gold instead of an eerie red, and her ears had a slight point to them now as she stared sightlessly ahead while keeping a firm grip on Chizuru's kodachi, which had somehow ended up in her hand and now had blood dripping off of it. "What?!? How?"

"Hm? You mean, you didn't notice?" Kazama asked Chizuru, tilting his head slightly. "While I took care of these two, she cut down the one threatening you. She reached her limit as a human, so she turned into an oni for you. Despite being on the verge of unconsciousness, her body ignored the critical condition it was in and moved on its own to save you." He explained, moving towards them, as he sheathed his sword. "She protected you above all else. She really is a komainu."

"S-Stay back!" Chizuru said sternly, trying to back away, but Sumiko wouldn't budge. "Don't come any closer! Don't make fun of Sumiko-san!"

"I meant it as a compliment. But it would be bad to leave her this

way." Kazama stated calmly as he ignored her and quickly side-stepped Sumiko when she automatically raised the sword again, grabbing her wrist as he delivered a swift blow to the back of her neck to render her completely unconscious. "It's a strain on her body to move with those wounds." He said, catching Sumiko's limp and bloody body as she fell forward into his arms.

"!" Chizuru gasped, alarmed. She quickly moved to pick up her sword, wanting to protect her friend.

"Don't." Kazama told her, watching as the sleeping Sumiko's hair and ears returned to their usual color and form. "I've just come to watch what the Yodo Domain is up to."

"Yodo Domain?" Chizuru said somberly, looking down as she lowered her sword.

"Judging by your reaction, it seems you've learned that they've betrayed you." He commented, watching as Chizuru quietly sheathed her sword and walked over to the corpse wearing a Shinsengumi haori.

"Inoue-san! Inoue-san!" Chizuru sobbed as she fell to her knees, mourning the man who fell protecting them.

"All of Kyoto's domains were handed a secret letter from the Imperial court." Kazama continued as he set Sumiko down so that her back was propped up against a tree while he examined her wounds more closely.

"A secret letter?" Chizuru asked, glancing back at him.

" 'The Satcho army flies brocade flags. They are your allies.' That's the message." He said, narrowing his eyes when he saw the bullet wound so close to Sumiko's heart. This was bad. Even a pureblooded oni would have trouble healing from a wound that! She needed a doctor.

"Brocade flags?" Chizuru said, furrowing her brow in confusion.

"The Bakufu are now the insurgents, and Satcho the loyalists." He explained patiently, wondering why she wasn't showing more concern for her wounded friend. Was Yukimura Chizuru in shock? Kazama started ripping Sumiko's sleeves to make bandages to bind her wound and slow the bleeding.

"It can't be!" Chizuru exclaimed, shocked.

"Satcho will crush the Bakufu and obtain everything. Their objective is money and power." He removed his long haori and wrapped Sumiko up in it to keep her warm. She usually had so much presence, that hadn't realized just how small and delicate she really was until he saw how his haori enveloped her. She had never seemed so fragile before. "As always, humans are foolish creatures."

"You're saying that they're fighting over money\_!\_?" Chizuru cried, jumping to her feet. It couldn't be! then, just for that everyone!\_!\_?

"War has always been a pretext for pillaging."

"Not everyone is like that!" Chizuru insisted passionately.

"Like the Shinsengumi?" Kazama asked as he stood up and turned to face her. "They merely kill those who oppose them, yes? How are they different from me?"

"We fight because we have something to protect." Hijikata said, alerting them to his presence as he arrived on the scene. "You think only of yourself. Don't think that we're the same." Hijikata added, glaring sternly at the oni.

"Hijikata-san. Inoue-san isâ€¦ Sumiko-san isâ€¦" Chizuru said sadly, trailing off as she glanced between the two of them.

"Gen-san! Sumiko!" Hijikata said as he stepped closer and saw Inoue's corpse and the unconscious and deathly pale Sumiko. "Was it you? You did this?" He demanded, glaring at Kazama.

"Hijikata-san, that'sâ€¦" Chizuru started.

"What if I did?" Kazama retorted with a smirk.

"Kazama-san!" Chizuru gasped, surprised. Why was heâ€¦!?! Without another word, Hijikata drew his sword. "Please, wait! Inoue-san and Sumikoâ€¦"

"My, my. Another senseless death, huh? Why the rush to die?" Kazama asked as he drew his own blade. This should be quick.

"A 'senseless death', you bastard?" Hijikata growled dangerously as he glared fiercely at the infuriating oni. "You!" He thrust his sword at Kazama, but the oni blocked it. "A 'senseless death' was that, you son of a bitch\_!?" Hijikata roared furiously as he continued to barrage Kazama with a series of fierce attacks. Kazama grit his teeth as he continuously blocked and dodged, surprised by just how dangerous the human had suddenly become in his rage. Despite being a pureblood oni, even he was beginning to have a hard time keeping up with him.

"Hijikata-san! Please stop!" Chizuru pleaded, but her cries fell on deaf ears. Hijikata was too caught up in his rage to stop.

CLANG!

"!" Hijikata and Chizuru gasped, stunned when Kazama blocked an incredibly strong attack using only one hand again, and they saw that not only had his blonde hair turned silver-white, his eyes were a pale gold, and his ears were pointed; but he had a set of four ivory horns growing out of his head!

"I never thought I'd reveal this before a humanâ€¦" Kazama said lowly, narrowing his eyes at Hijikata. "The true form of an on!" He swept his sword and Hijikata's aside, forcing the human back as he had to grab onto the hilt of his blade with both hands to keep a grip. He hadn't wanted to use this form on a mere human, but he hadn't expected the fight to go on for this long. Time was running out for Miyagawa Sumiko. He had to get to her to Koudou.



CLANG! \_CLANG! \_CLANG!

"!" Hijikata grunted as he struggled to keep his sword raised against the blitz of powerful attacks Kazama began enacting with a simple flick of his wrist and several fierce thrusts of his blade. Hijikata was now being forced back with such ease, that it was like watching a fight between an adult and a child.

'That'sâ€¦| Kazama-san's true formâ€¦|?' Chizuru thought as she watched with wide eyes. Aside from the horns, it was just like how Sumiko had changed earlier! 'Sumiko-sanâ€¦| she really is an oni, too!' Until now, she had never truly been able to completely accept that either one of them was truly an oni, butâ€¦| after what she had seen todayâ€¦| There was no denying it anymore, was there?

"Is \_this\_ the full extent of your anger?" Kazama asked tauntingly as he continued to press Hijikata.

"You bastard!" Hijikata cursed, charging forward.

\_SLASH!\_

For a split moment, Hijikata thought he may have finally succeeded in cutting down Kazama when the oni just continued to stand there, but just as he realized he hadn't actually felt his sword pass through a solid object, the oni faded and disappeared. "What?" The thing he cut had simply been an afterimage left behind when the oni moved too fast for his human eyes to keep up with. The real Kazama was behind him. With wide eyes, Hijikata quickly spun around to face the oni, but he was too slow. Kazama struck, sending Hijikata's blade flying from his hands.

"This is the end." The oni told him. "After all, you're just a band of cowardly fools, powerless on your own." Hijikata furrowed his brow. "What could you possibly do on your own? What could the likes of you 'protect'? Don't make me laugh!" He swung his sword at Hijikata, but the human managed to stumble back in time to avoid the tip of his blade. Hijikata grabbed his sword and took up a defensive stance. "You still intend to fight in your condition?" Kazama asked. The man was panting heavily, and his injured hand was bleeding through the bandages. He was obviously so exhausted he could barely even stand at this point. Hijikata furrowed his brow and reached into his kimono, pulling out a small vial of red liquid.

"That'sâ€¦|!" Chizuru gasped.

"Ochimizu, huh? Just how foolish are you?" Kazama asked loftily as he furrowed his brow.

" 'Foolish'? And what of it?" Hijikata asked lowly as he clutched the vial of Ochimizu. "From the start, we were a band of foolish men. We shared an idiotic dream, followed it in earnest all the way here. We're still just halfway up that steep slope of a road. There's no way I can stumble now, falling all the way back down!" He roared, biting the vial's stopper so he could remove it with his teeth.

"Hijikata-san, no!" Chizuru cried.

"Even if you become a rasetzu, you're still just a fake." Kazama told

him with a smirk. "Not a true opponent for an Oni."

"We won't know that till we try!" Hijikata retorted, downing the entire vial.

"Noooo!" Chizuru screamed, reaching out for him, but it was too late. As Hijikata squeezed his eyes shut and threw his head back, his long, flowing black hair faded to white. "Hijikata-san!"

"I can't stand it anymore." Hijikata said lowly as he leaned forward with his head down. "Those Bakufu cowards! You pain-in-the-ass oni! You say I'm a fake? So what if I am? This whole time we've been treated like a group of fake samurai. But no matter what, our convictions will not bend. Whether fake or not, persistence will make it true." His white hair fluttered in the wind as he raised his head and stared ahead resolutely at Kazama with glowing crimson eyes. "So if I, a rasetsu defeat you, then I—we can become real!" He declared, letting out a war cry as he raised his sword and charged forth. "Yaaah!"

\_CLANG! WOOSH!\_

Kazama grit his teeth and furrowed his brow as he blocked Hijikata's fierce attack, which had enough speed and force behind it to send a shearing wind shooting out behind the initial attack.

"What's wrong?" Hijikata jeered at him as he applied even more pressure behind his sword. "You're falling back!" He pushed down at an angle, forcing Kazama's blade down to the side as his own slid forward to mar the oni's face with a cut, drawing blood.

"Guah!" Kazama grunted in surprise and pain as he slid back in order to avoid the rest of the blade. He grit his teeth and glared furiously at Hijikata.

"How does it feel having been injured by a fake, General of the Oni-san?" Hijikata asked mockingly as he watched Kazama begin to tremble with rage as he reached up and felt the bleeding cut on his face.

"Bastard! A bastard like you, scarring my face!?" Kazama shouted incredulously, pointing his sword at Hijikata, as he glared wrathfully at the human-turned-rasetsu, before charging back at him with whole new level of killing intent.

Chizuru watched with wide eyes as their battle intensified. Back and forth they struggled against each other, moving with inhuman speed and strength, barraging each other with series of violent and powerful attacks. At this rate, it wasn't going to end until one of them died.

"Hijikata-san!" Chizuru screamed as they both simultaneously lunged in for the kill.

\_SLASH! CLANG!\_

Hijikata furrowed his brow and his eyes widened as his mind began to process what had just occurred. In the same exact moment that Chizuru had begun to scream, two figures had thrown themselves into midst of his battle with Kazama to interrupt their fight. The tall red-haired

oni Amagiri had stopped his blade using only the back of his fist, while holding Kazama back by pressing an elbow into the angry oni's abdomen. He had done nothing to stop Kazama's blade. Hijikata stared down in horror when he realized that the one who saved him had been Yamazaki, and he had done so by using his own body to shield him.

"What are you doing, Vice-commander?" Yamazaki asked with a trembling voice as he clung to Hijikata, enduring the immense pain from the deep wound on his back. "As our leader, you're our head, and we're the arms and legs, right? Without our limbs, we can get by, but without our headâ€¦ It's the end of everything." His grip on Hijikata loosened, and he fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

"Yamazaki-san!" Chizuru cried, running over to check on him. "Yamazaki-san! Yamazaki-san!" Hijikata's hair and eyes began returning to normal as he stared down them in shock.

"Yamazakiâ€¦" Hijikata said, horrified that one of his men had felt the need to sacrifice himself in order to save him.

"This is enough, yes?" Amagiri asked Kazama. "Satcho forces will be here soon. We'd do well to be gone before then. And, alsoâ€¦" He glanced over at the unconscious Sumiko, who was still lying under the tree wrapped up in Kazama's haori. "Miyagawa Sumiko's condition appears to have become critical. She will not survive any further delay." Kazama glanced from Sumiko's pale face back to Hijikata. He closed his eyes and sheathed his sword.

"It would seem we narrowly escaped. Both of us." Kazama told Hijikata. The blade of the new rasetsu's sword had been mere inches from the top of his head when Amagiri and that ninja intervened. "We'll finish this another day, Hijikata Toshizo." He vowed quietly as he knelt down to collect Sumiko. The two and a half oni disappeared as more humans arrived on the scene.

"Hijikata-san! Yamazaki! Where are you?" Shinpachi called out as he, Sano, and Saito came running up. "Hijikata-san!" They all gasped and came to an abrupt halt when they saw how seriously injured Yamazaki was and Inoue's corpse.

"Just what happened here?" Sano asked as he glanced around.

"Look after Yamazaki." Hijikata said quietly, finally breaking his long silence.

"Ah." Shinpachi nodded and hurried over to check on him. "This is bad. Someone, get some cloth! Sumiko-san, what should weâ€¦ Sumiko? Where's Sumiko?" He asked, furrowing his brow, when he realized she wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"Sumiko-san!\_?" Chizuru gasped as her eyes widened and she began glancing around wildly. She had been so preoccupied with looking after Hijikata and Yamazaki, that she hadn't even realized the oni had left. "She's goneâ€¦! They took her!"

"What!\_?" Shinpachi and Sano exclaimed as Saito furrowed his brow with concern.

"Vice-commander. Just what happened here?" Saito asked.

"Sumiko was injured. The oni took her." Hijikata replied solemnly as he stared at the worn and beaten blade of his sword. "I never thought I would live on, using a troop member as a sacrifice." Gen-san, Sumiko, and Yamazaki. He had failed all three of them.

#### 43. The Fall

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

#### <p><strong>Chapter 43: The Fall<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Hijikata and Saito worked together to dig a grave for Inoue-san while Chizuru wiped the blood from his body's face and neck, and Sano and Shinpachi took care of treating Yamazaki's wound as best as they could.<p>

"Inoue-san," Chizuru said sadly. "Sumiko-san." The oni had taken her and disappeared without a trace, leaving behind no trail for them to follow.

"Those three seem to be Bakufu army samurai," Saito said as he paused in digging and glanced over at the forgotten bodies of the three soldiers that were also in the area.

"They killed Gen-san and shot Sumiko. Just leave them." Hijikata said darkly as he continued to dig.

"How do you know that?" Chizuru asked.

"Though you faced Kazama, you didn't draw your short sword." He replied.

"Eh?"

"Knowing you, I'm sure you'd strike down Gen-san's killer. I knew that Kazama didn't kill Gen-san, and that Sumiko needed medical attention, but. At that instant, it built up inside of me. I couldn't help it. That bastard challenged me as if he'd seen through everything." He said, furrowing his brow as his voice wavered with frustration and guilt. "But don't worry about Sumiko-san. He wouldn't have bothered to wrap her up with such care if he intended to let her die. I'm sure he's taken her to have her wounds treated by Koudou-san. With herself and Yamazaki out of commission, we have no doctor left in our troop. I don't know what he wants from her, but right now, in her condition, she may be safer with them. Don't worry. Sumiko won't die so easily. We'll see her again. We'll get her back, I promise."

"Hai." Chizuru said softly as a tear rolled down her cheek.

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After helping to giving Inoue a proper burial, Chizuru faithfully relayed his final message to Hijikata, and they made their way to Osaka Castle with the other remaining four. It was a difficult journey for Yamazaki, whom they had to take turns carrying. Night had well finished falling by the time they reached the castle and reunited with Kondo and the others, only to receive some even more disheartening news.

"What do you mean, the Shogun's not here!?" Hijikata demanded incredulously, unable to believe what he had just heard.

"It was a little while before you arrived." Kondo replied calmly. "The Shogun headed for Edo, accompanied by the ruler of Aizu."

"Edo!?" Hijikata asked.

"You're saying the supreme commander turned tail and ran in the middle of battle!?" Shinpachi exclaimed incredulously.

"Do not blame the Shogun." Kondo said. "I'm sure he has his reasons."

"I couldn't care less." Hijikata said, furrowing his brow. "We stay here and fight." He had promised Chizuru they were going to get Sumiko back. They couldn't leave yet.

"However, next to no gunpowder or provisions remain in the castle." Shimada informed him regretfully as a bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

"What was that!?" Hijikata said, furrowing his brow. Did the Shogun take it with him? They couldn't have used the entire Castle's store up so quickly!

"There's something else." San'nan said. "The Rasetsu Unit launched a nighttime attack, and most of them were killed."

"The Rasetsu Unit!?" Sano said, astonished.

"It's those silver bullets from before." Heisuke explained.

"The ones that got Souji last time, huh?" Sano asked, furrowing his brow. Heisuke nodded.

"It looks like someone on their side knows all about us."

"Even we rasetsus cannot recover from wounds made by silver bullets." San'nan said. "After we ran out of that medicine Miyagawa-san made that helped Okita-kun, our fatalities more than doubled."

"The Shogun ran off, we've got no weapons or food, our resident miracle-worker's been kidnapped! And our ace in the hole, the Rasetsu Unit, is almost wiped out, huh?" Shinpachi asked, gritting his teeth in frustration.

"Between a rock and a hard place, aren't we?" Sano commented, frowning as he furrowed his brow. If only they could have at least gotten Sumiko back!

"Hijikata-kun. Let us, too, make for Edo for now." San'nan suggested grimly. Hijikata furrowed his brow and grit his teeth.

"Dammit!" Hijikata cursed, clenching his fist. There was no choice. With the way things were, they'd have to leave for Edo. Staying here while everyone else fled would be suicide. Sumiko's rescue would have to wait. They couldn't do anything for her if they were dead.

"

"Mnh" Sumiko mumbled as she slowly began to open her eyes and stir, wincing slightly against the bright light and sharp pain in her chest and shoulder.

"Are you awake?" A familiar voice that she hadn't expected to hear asked, causing her eyes to widened as they adjusted to the light in the room.

"Koudou-sensei!?" She exclaimed, shooting up into a sitting position despite the pain. She couldn't believe it. The man she and Chizuru had gone through so much to find, the man who had supposedly turned his back on the Bakufu, was sitting right next to the futon she was lying on, as if waiting for her. "What are you? where am I?" She asked, lowering her voice, as she glanced cautiously around the room.

"Now, calm down. Don't strain yourself!" Koudou chided her as he gently but firmly placed a hand on her uninjured shoulder and back to guide her back down into a reclining position. "You're safe. You're inside Yodo Castle."

"Yodo? \_safe\_? You know these guys shot at me earlier today, right?" She asked, chagrined. What Kazama had said about Koudou siding with him and Satsuma really must be true if he was able to be this calm about being inside a stronghold on the Imperials' side.

"They shot at you two days ago." He corrected her. "That's how long you've been unconscious. You gave us quite a scare. When I asked you take care of Chizuru for me, this isn't what I had in mind."

"Yeah, well, stuff happened." Sumiko said, sweat-dropping, as she tried to avoid his look of stern disapproval while stuck in the futon. "Where's Chizuru? Is she safe? Kazama didn't get her, did he?" She asked, furrowing her brow with concern.

"Kazama is the one who brought you here, you know?" Koudou told her with a wry smile and a shake of his head. "He saved your life. Would it be so bad for him to have brought Chizuru along as well? To be honest, I was surprised he left her behind with the Shinsengumi. I think she would be much safer here, unless you know something I don't." He added with a pointed look.

"Two days, huh?" Sumiko said, frowning, as she furrowed her brow again. "That makes this, what?"

"February 2nd." Koudou replied calmly. "Is that significant?"

"It's the fall of Osaka Castle." Sumiko replied with a tired sigh. "Hijikata-san and the others were supposed to be headed there, but you don't have to worry. Whatever happens, those guys'll protect Chizuru, and they'll already be long gone by the time the Imperial forces show up to take it. I don't know if you know this yet, but the Shogun fled the same night I got shot. Once the Bakufu forces learned their leader left, they followed."

"Hmm?" Kazama hummed curiously from the doorway, alerting them to his presence. "I see you're speaking of events that have yet to transpire in the past-tense." He remarked as he entered the room. "Is it because you're from the future, Miyagawa Sumiko?" He asked with a smirk as he looked down at her. She was looking much better now that the color was back in her cheeks, but he could do without the glare she was giving him.

"Sensei—| Why did you ever tell this guy about that?" She asked sternly, glancing over at Koudou as the crease in her brow deepened. "You swore you'd never tell anyone! I only told you because you were there, and I thought you deserved to know what kind of person you were taking in, since you went out of your way to help me."

"Well, given how your first encounter with Kazama-san went, I thought it might help your chances of survival if I gave him a reason to keep you alive—| I was trying to keep something like this from happening. Don't worry, Kazama-san is the only who knows." Koudou said with another pointed look, gesturing to her almost fatal wounds. "Though, it seems you're still reluctant to take me at my word—|" He added with a glance at the other oni.

"Well, normally no one would." Sumiko said reasonably. "Not without any proof."

"Hmph." Kazama smirked. "I still don't see how you can expect me to believe such a story when someone who should know better chooses to fight on the losing side and allows herself to be shot like this."

"I'm not omniscient, okay? I've just had a sneak peak at what's around the corner, is all." She retorted with a frown. "As for picking the 'losing' side, I did know, aside from the being shot part, how this was going to turn out. But what was I supposed to tell those guys? Don't fight, you'll lose? Switch sides while you still can? As if they'd have gone for that. You're right, I could've avoided the battle if I'd wanted, but they're my friends. I wasn't about to let them walk into hell alone. But whatever. It's better if you don't believe me. Saves me the trouble of being shaken like a Magic 8 Ball by someone every time there's a situation."

"Friends?" Koudou asked, blinking. "Weren't you being held captive by them?" He asked as he furrowed his brow, looking troubled.

"Maybe in the beginning, but now they treat me like one of the guys, and Chizuru's pretty much become our little 'Hime-sama'." She said with a wry smile. "They let us come and go as we please, and we help them out with odd jobs here and there to earn our keep. If there was a guard on us, it was meant to be a deterrent against kidnappers." She added, shooting pointed look at Kazama.

"As if that would have stopped me."

"It did a few times."

"Yo!" Shiranui said as he stepped in through the doorway, followed by Amagiri. "I see you two are getting along just as well as always."

"It's time for us to go." Amagiri stated calmly. "Satsuma wishes to send us out ahead to gauge the situation at Osaka Castle before sending in the rest of the troops."

"Hmph. We'll finish this later." Kazama told Sumiko as he stood up and turned to leave. "Incidentally, what do you think we'll find there?" He asked, pausing to glance back at her.

Sumiko furrowed her brow and frowned, wondering if it was a good idea to confirm her status as a time traveler. She didn't know why Kazama had bothered to save her, since she was always getting in his way, butâ€|

"The castle will be surrendered without resistance." She replied after a moment of silence. "Satcho will seize and burn it to the ground. Osaka Castle will be in ruins before the end of the day. This event signals the official start of the Bakufu's fall from grace." As much as she didn't want to, Koudou had a point. She needed to make herself useful enough to be kept alive until she was well enough to escape.

Shiranui let out a low whistle.

"Wow. Not much confidence in your friends, huh?" He asked, raising an eyebrow. "You don't think they'd stay so they could try to get you back?"

"I'd never forgive them if they did." Sumiko said, frowning as she furrowed her brow. "Everyone else on the Bakufu side will have left. Staying would be suicide. I'd much rather they lived to fight another day, wouldn't you?"

"Heh. Yeah." Shiranui said with a rueful grin. "I still haven't finished my match with Harada yet. It'd suck if he let someone else take him out before then."

"Well, that's not quite what I meantâ€|" Sumiko said sweat-dropping, as she watched the three oni leave to carry out their mission. "Anyway, Sensei," Sumiko said as she turned her head to glance back at Koudou, "there's still a lot that Iâ€|"

SMACK.

"!" Sumiko exclaimed, surprised when the older man suddenly delivered a swift smack to her forehead with the palm of his hand. "Ow! What was for\_!\_?"

"Don't do things like this in the future!" He said sternly, referring to her gunshot wounds. "Chizuru isn't the only one who's important to me. I care about both of you girls. I never told you this before, because I didn't know how, butâ€| I didn't just take you in out of the kindness of my heart that night I first found you."



"Eh?" Sumiko said as she paused in rubbing her sore head to stare up at him in confusion. "Sensei, what do youâ€|?"

"I used to have a sister." Koudou said with a kind, sad smile as he stared down at her with a far off look in his eyes. "A half-sister, to be more precise. We had the same mother but different fathers. Even though my father was a lesser oni, and she had special powers that were rare even for the most pureblooded oni, she never looked down on me or treated me like I was inferior. She was always a very happy and lively girl, kind to everyoneâ€| but that all changed when she reached a marriageable age. A prestigious oni clan from Tosa, had their eye on her. They wanted her to marry the heir of their main branch, but she refused, claiming she had already fallen in love with someone else. Our parents continued to pressure her to accept the arranged marriage, claiming it would be good for her and the family, but in the end she eloped with the human man that she had been seeing in secret. We were all shocked. Even I hadn't known about him, but she was already pregnant and couldn't bear the thought of marrying any man other than the father of her child. While the Yukimura clan was still stunned by this development, the other oni clan took it as a grave insult and hunted my sister. When I heard what they were up to, I tried to find her and warn her before they could get to her, but I was too late. They killed her human lover when he stayed behind to by time for her to flee and give birth. They wanted to kill their child as well to punish her for 'shaming' them, but when they found her, she had already given birth, and the child was gone. They questioned her, but she refused to give any details, saying only that she had sent it 'somewhere safe and far beyond their reach'. I arrived just in time to witness her commit suicide in order to avoid being taken by themâ€|" Koudou finished regretfully, clenching his fists as he stared down morosely at the floor. "For the longest time, I thought my both my sister and the infant had perished, but then, about five years ago, when I was walking back home one night from making an emergency house callâ€| a girl suddenly appeared in the middle of a dark street in a bright flash of light." He said, glancing up at her with a wan smile. "You looked so much like my sister, that at first I thought you might be her ghost. I wasn't sure at first, but the longer you stayed with us, the more certain I became that you had to be my sister's missing child." Sumiko's eyes widened as she stared up at him in astonishment.

"But, Iâ€|"

"Came from the future? Yes, that threw me through a loop as well. But as I mentioned before, my sister was said to have had mysterious powers, even for an oni. And the charm you had on you at the time, the one you said you'd had ever since they found you and brought you to the orphanage as an infant, was something that belonged to her. She used to have one just like it in her possession before she passed away, but it disappeared along with the infant. Magatama are said to be stones of power. I think she used it to cast some kind of spell to send you 'somewhere safe and far away', and as a result, you were sent to the future. And then, when your life was in danger in the future, it acted on its own to bring you back to the past to save you again. I know this whole time you've been worried because you felt like you didn't really belong in this world, but I think you were meant to come here. You might have grown up in the future, but you were born in the past. You belong here, with us." He said, smiling as he placed his hands on her shoulders. Sumiko stared up at the ceiling as she tried to take it all in and process everything she had just

heard. It was a good thing she was already lying down, because her head was spinning. She didn't know what to think. All this time, she thought she had been abandoned. She had been walking on eggshells and constantly worrying about whether or not she would ever be able to return to future, because she thought she didn't belong in this timeâ€¦ And nowâ€¦

A tear slid down the side of her face as one of her oldest memories floated to the surface of her mind. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly as she tried not to cry.

"Sumikoâ€¦?" Koudou said worriedly, furrowing his brow in concern. "Sumiko, please. I know it's been hard on you, but please don't hate your mother. She only did it to protect you."

"I wasn't just abandonedâ€¦ Deep down, I alwaysâ€¦" Sumiko said, holding her hands over her face to cover her eyes as she cried. "I don't know whether it's real or just a dream, butâ€¦ my earliest memory is that person's crying face. Her tears kept falling as she apologized over and over again before letting me go. It's hard to hate someone after seeing them like thatâ€¦ I knew she hadn't done it lightly, but now I knowâ€¦ I finally know how much they really loved me, my birth parents. I \_was \_wanted a child\_,\_ after all....!"

"Of course you were." Koudou said, smiling wanly as he gently placed a reassuring hand on top of her head and stroked her hair, like he used to do for Chizuru when she was younger. "And you still are. So don't do such reckless things, like playing catch with bullets anymore, okay? Don't make me bury my niece, too."

"Haiâ€¦" Sumiko said, sniffing, as she wiped her tears and smiled for him.

#### 44. The Other Side of the Other Side

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 44: The Other Side of the Other Side<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"How was it?" Koudou asked when Kazama and the others returned later that evening. He was currently checking on his other patients, Satcho's wounded from the previous encounters with the Bakufu at Toba and Fushimi.<p>

"Just as she said." Kazama replied with the hint of a smirk.

"Yeah, aside from watching that huge building go up in flames, it was really uneventful." Shiranui added with a shrug. "Where is she, still in bed? I wanna ask how she knew."

"I'm afraid that will have to wait." Koudou replied calmly as he finished putting his medical tools away. "She's resting now. She used up all her energy and wore herself out earlier. You can talk try talking to her again tomorrow."

"Tch, that's no fun." Shiranui remarked with a disappointed frown as he turned and walked off to find something else to do to pass the time. "I was gonna have her entertain me since I'm getting sick of being surrounded by all these sweaty guysâ€|"

"She's only half oni. Her recovery rate is slower than ours." Koudou reminded him with a sigh, shaking his head. "She'll need to rest for a couple of more days before she can have such a rowdy visitorâ€|" He mumbled.

"Is her condition still that severe?" Amagiri asked.

"Well, her life is no longer any immediate danger," Koudou replied, frowning slightly, as he started heading back to his room to put his medical kit away, "but not only did the bullet didn't just pass dangerously close to her heart, she's recovering from a punctured lung as well. So she's only able to breath in and out half the amount of air she normallyâ€| Are you listening, Kazama-san?" He asked as he and Amagiri both turned to make sure the younger oni was paying attention, but the spot where Kazama had been previously walking behind them was now empty.

Amagiri let out a sigh. He must have gone to see her again. Ever since they had brought Miyagawa Sumiko back with them, Kazama had been acting like a child fascinated with a new toy. Even though she had been unconscious over the past two days, Kazama had often sat in the room they were keeping her in for the duration of what little spare time they had.

"And here I just said she wasn't up for visitors yetâ€|" Koudou mumbled disgruntledly as he rubbed his bald head, jumping to the same conclusion as Amagiri.

â€"â^žâ€"

SLIDE.

"Here kitty, kitty." Sumiko called gently.

"Hn?" Kazama said, pausing in the door way as he watched Sumiko wave at a cat that was sitting on the porch just outside the room. He was surprised Koudou had left the outside door open after going on about how she was still recovering. "I had heard you exhausted yourself, but you seem to be in a lively enough mood now." He commented as he watched the cat respond to her beckoning and enter the room.

"It's an easy thing to do when you're recovering from a punctured lung." Sumiko replied casually as reached out to pet the feline, which started rubbing up against her. "And sometimes having a long cry can be good for releasing pent up stress."

"You were crying?" He asked, furrowing his brow.

"Yeah, I've a surprisingly emotional day. But for same reason I was crying earlier, I'm in a good mood now." She replied rather enigmatically. Not even a visit from her kidnapper/benefactor could dampen her spirits. "Is this the lord's cat? It looks too pampered to be a stray." She smiled as it flopped onto its side beside her and purred. "Look at you, you big softie. You like that, huh?" She asked it, grinning, as she stroked the bobtail calico's soft fur and

scratched it under its chin.

"Hmph. You really like animals, don't you?" Kazama asked with a slight smirk as he watched her play with it and smile like an innocent child, completely letting her guard down around the feline.

"Yeah. I've always had a soft spot for cats. They wouldn't let us keep a pet at the orphanage, but I'd feed the strays that would sometimes wander into the courtyard. I guess I sort of empathized with them, being a stray myself." She replied with a wan smile. "I've always liked animals because they were easier to read than the people around me. What they wanted was obvious, and if they didn't like what you were doing, they'd let you know right away and forgive you almost as soon as you corrected it. They didn't hold grudges or have ulterior motives, and even when they occasionally bit or scratched me, I knew it wasn't out of malice. Everything a wild animal does is geared toward survival and nothing more. They were just doing their best to live in a concrete jungle built by humans, and that was all they had to communicate with me."

"It sounds as though you like them more than humans." He commented. Maybe convincing her to stay with them would be easier than he had thought.

"Maybeâ€¦ The orphanage I was in was mostly run by a group of corrupted adults who cared more for themselves than the children they were supposed to be responsible for. It felt like I was living in a shark tank most of time. Animals are safe. They're easy to predict. If you act according to the rules of their nature, you'll know exactly what to expect. But people aren't like that. They're harder to please and quicker to turn on their own kind. They're dangerousâ€¦ but it's not like I hate them." She said solemnly, turning back to face him. "I know that not everyone is like that. Humans can also be as kind as they are cruel. After all, despite how different I was, there were still a few kids who were willing to call me their friend and let me play with them, and I had Annie and the Miyagawas to make up for the rest of the adults in my life."

"Annie?" Kazama asked curiously. Wasn't that a foreign name?

"She was my main benefactor before I met the Miyagawas." Sumiko replied with a fond smile. "Annie was only part Japanese, and she had pale blond hair and hazel eyes. I thought she was beautiful, but she was teased a lot for it when she was younger and given a hard time because of the way she looked. To top it all off, she was born and raised in America for the first half of her life, so she didn't act like your average Japanese, and even though she'd been living in our country for over a decade already by the time I met her, they still called her 'foreigner', like it was something bad. Annie never really fit in, and I guess that's why the two of us got along so well. We knew both what it was like to be the nail that sticks out and gets hammered the most. She protected me from the people who would show up every now and then, who wanted to do experiments on me, saying: 'She's a child, not a pincushion!'" Sumiko laughed as she remembered some of the bewildered and frightened expression on the faces of those doctors and lab technicians when Annie had really let them have it. "Annie could be a real spitfire, terrifying when angered. But even when I was a brat, she was always really patient with me. The other adults, once they realized they couldn't use me, saw me as a

nuisance since I was 'a strange and troublesome child' and always breaking things because I couldn't always control my strength. I think a lot of them were actually afraid of meâ€¦ but not Annie. Even when I accidentally hurt one of the other kids while we were playing, and the other adults wanted to yell at me and punish me, she'd just smile kindly and say things like: 'You're twice as strong as all the other kids, so you just have learn to be twice as gentle.' And she'd take her time teaching me how to interact more carefully with others. I really owe a lot to Annie. She taught me self-worth and how to stand up for myself. She played a huge part in forming my personality and helping me become the person I am today."

"Hm. So, she's the one who laid the foundation for you to become a komainuâ€¦" Kazama said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, sheâ€¦ \_What?\_" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow as she glanced up at him with a darkened expression. "Tell me you did not just call me some kind of dog again."

"Do you have a problem with komainu?" Kazama asked. "They're brave and loyal creatures, worthy of respect. And I don't recall ever having ever compared you to a dog before."

"You possess a really convenient memory, don't you?" Sumiko asked, chagrined. "You called me a mongrel when we first met, before I ever even did anything worth being insulted for!"

"You're still holding a grudge over that?" Kazama asked with a frown. "Do you even know the definition of that word that offends you so much? Mongrel: 'an individual resulting from the interbreeding of diverse breeds or strains, especially one of unknown ancestry.' Did it's use not accurately describe your situation?"

"I don't deny it's accuracyâ€¦" She replied hesitantly, furrowing her brow as she frowned. "But where I come from, it's usually only used in a derogatory sense and refers to dogs of a mixed breeds, like calling someone a mangy mutt. And anyway, I just learned from Sensei that I'm probably his niece, so the 'unknown ancestry' part no longer applies."

"You're Koudou's niece?" He asked, surprised.

"Yeah. That's time travel for you." She replied with a sigh as the cat abruptly rolled back onto its feet and scampered off to seek more attention elsewhere. "It's a cornucopia of confusing and disturbing concepts."

"So, you're of the Yukimura bloodline, tooâ€¦" He said thoughtfully.

"Yep. It looks like I'm cousins with Chizuru. Who'd have thought? I guess it's a small world, after allâ€¦" She said, staring up at the ceiling. She still wondered why Koudou had never even told Chizuru about her being an oni, but for some reason, she had found it really difficult to askâ€¦ "Ah! But don't go getting any strange ideas!" She said quickly, glancing over at him. "I'm still only half oni."

"And as such, she needs her rest!" Koudou said firmly as he slid the door open and entered the room, followed by Amagiri. "She won't be able to recover properly of you keep badgering her like

this."

"Hmph. We'll finish this some other time." Kazama said, frowning slightly as he stood up and turned to leave, disappointed and somewhat irritated that they had been interrupted just when he had finally been able to have a real conversation with the komainu.

"You have shown a surprising amount of interest in Miyagawa Sumiko." Amagiri commented as they walked down the corridor together. "Could it be you have come to favor her over Yukimura Chizuru?"

"And, what if I have?" Kazama said calmly, surprising him. "Do you disapprove?" Amagiri? He asked, narrowing his eyes ever so slightly, as he eyed the older oni.

"Despite being only half oni, Miyagawa Sumiko has her own merits..." Amagiri answered slowly. "However, Yukimura Chizuru's pure blood makes her irreplaceable. It is without question that she should be brought back to our race."

"Naturally." Kazama said. "Whatever I decide in the end, even if I have lost some of my personal interest in Yukimura Chizuru, I have no intention of leaving her with the humans. For her own safety, she must be brought over to our side."

#### 45. The Tangled Web

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 45: The Tangled Web<strong>

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><p>"Like I said," Sumiko needs her rest, so what are you all doing eating your breakfast in her room?" Koudou demanded curtly as he, Kazama, Amagiri, and Shiranui all sat around Sumiko while they ate, who was eating off of her tray in her futon.<p>

"Having our medical advice be ignored must run in the family," Sumiko commented as she sweat-dropped, chagrined. "Why \_are\_ you here?" She asked the three oni.

"We're sick of eating with all those noisy and sweaty guys." Shiranui replied unapologetically. "It's obvious we'd prefer the room with a flower in it."

"Flower?" Sumiko asked with a wry smile. "You sound just like Sano-san."

"Sano-san?" Koudou asked curiously.

"Harada Sanosuke. He was the only one who treated me even remotely like a girl." She explained. "Aside from him and Hijikata-san, all the others kept calling me 'Aniki' and so on."

"Aniki?" Amagiri said, blinking.

"Yeah." Sumiko said with a sigh and small laugh. "It all started after Heisuke's group saw me save a cat while we were on patrol. I don't get what the big deal was, but apparently they thought the way I did was really 'manly', and they suddenly started asking if they could call me Aniki. I told them no, but they did it anyway."

"Hah! I can definitely see that happening." Shiranui said with a grin. This woman had enough guts to try to fight and talk back to them, after all.

"Oh, that story reminds me..." Sumiko said as she lowered her chopsticks. "There's something I've been meaning to tell you, Amagiri-san."

"Me?" Amagiri asked, tilting his head slightly to the side while everyone else in the room glanced curiously at him.

"Yeah, so come here." She said, waving him over. Amagiri obediently did as she asked and knelt down beside her futon.

"Closer." Sumiko said, gesturing for him to lean down, as if she wanted to whisper something to him.

\_WHAM!\_

"!\_" Amagiri said, startled when she suddenly head-butted him with all her might. "Why? Why did you hit me with your head?" Amagiri asked, slightly chagrined, as he rubbed his sore forehead.

"Because it's the hardest part of me." Sumiko deadpanned. "That's for Heisuke. You know, that kid you almost killed at Aburanokoji."

"Oh! The one you brought back to life?" Shiranui asked brightly as he remembered the impressive feat. "That was really shocking! How's he doing?" Sumiko frowned and bowed her head as she looked down at the cover of her futon.

"I couldn't stop the bleeding." She said sadly. "In the end, he became a rasetu."

"Hmph. Indeed, they're all fools." Kazama, who had been silently enjoying his breakfast, said cynically. "That man, Hijikata Toshizo, became one as well." Sumiko's eyes widened in horror as she stared up at him.

"You're lying." She said, not wanting to believe it. "Why would he?"

"It is true." Amagiri said as he got back on his feet and walked over to join the others at the door so they could leave for their mission. "I witnessed him fighting Kazama in the form of a rasetu for myself."

"No!" Sumiko said quietly, shaking her head, as tears started to form in her eyes. Not Hijikata-san. Not him, too!

Kazama narrowed his eyes slightly and frowned when he saw the look in her eyes. He didn't like it.

"Let's go." He said, taking his tray with him as he stood up and headed for the door. Amagiri bowed politely before obediently following suit.

"Eh? I'm not done eating yet." Shiranui said, frowning.

"You are now. Come." Kazama said, giving him a sharp look. Shiranui grumbled but he picked up his tray and left with the others. Kazama glanced back to see Koudou pulling Sumiko into a fatherly embrace, trying to comfort her, while being careful of her wounds. He closed his eyes and shut the door, leaving the two of them alone, while she mourned Hijikata's foolish and rash decision to become a rasetsu.

After a moment, Sumiko clenched her fists and blinked back her tears as she lifted her head with a determined expression on her face.

"That settles it then." She said resolutely as she glanced at Koudou. "Sensei, this has been on my mind for a while nowâ€¦ I want to make a cure."

"A cure?" Koudou asked, furrowing his brow.

"For the rasetsus. I want to cure them." She stated determinedly.

"But that'sâ€¦" Koudou said hesitantly.

"They're suffering, Sensei. It's too pitiful! They think they're not human anymore, but they are, and that's the problem. Their human bodies can't keep up with the demand their new abilities puts on them. Advanced healingâ€¦ advanced muscle performanceâ€¦ these are all things that would require an extraordinary amount of blood, but their bodies are still only producing the same amount as before, so it puts an immense strain on their bodies to try and reconcile this huge gap between supply and demand. Their bodies simply can't keep up, and it causes them such excruciating pain that they lose their minds, and their body instinctively begins to seek out whatever its lacking in the worst way. Even if they manage to stay sane, the physical strain on their bodies will eventually kill them, won't it, Sensei?" She asked grimly, staring evenly at him.

"Youâ€¦ How did you find out about all of this?" Koudou asked, stunned. "They didn't make youâ€¦"

"No." Sumiko replied firmly. "They never even asked. I wanted nothing to do with that terrible medicine, but a couple of the rasetsus had been patients of mine at one point. I just couldn't leave them be, so I kept my eyes and ears open to learn what I could without getting too involved with the Ochimizu itself. Sensei, you left because you came to the same conclusion and wanted them to stop, didn't you? Help me end it, please." She bowed her head low while clutching the futon covers tightly in her fists.

"All right." Koudou agreed after a moment of silence with a small smile. "If you're that adamant about it, I'll do what I can to help you. Knowing you, I'm sure you already have a theory or two?" Sumiko nodded and smiled, relieved.



"Yes. I already tried making a powdered supplement with the same nutrients found in human blood and had Matsumoto-sensei give it to them under his name," She began, "but I've heard it only works for a limited time before its effectiveness wears off, and it's no longer enough to curb their bloodlust. Looking at the list of symptoms they're suffering from, I realized the rasetsu shared a lot of similarities to the vampires of European folklore and werewolves, whose legends are thought to be inspired by Viking berserkers. Both of these creatures are said to share a weakness against silver and are more active at night, like the rasetsu. I think both of these creatures are the result of different strains of the Elixir, but the ones who bear the closest resemblance to our rasetsu are the vampires; a silver allergy, photosensitivity, bloodlust, superhuman strength and healing abilities, only capable of being killed by beheading or a stake through the heartâ€¦ It all fits. And did you know, Sensei, that there is a certain illness that was once referred to as the 'vampire disease' in that part of the world?" Koudou's eyes widened. "Mind you, the so-called disease isn't actually a transmittable disease and has nothing to do with vampires, but a genetic disorder usually inherited and passed down from generation to the next. It's correct name is porphyria. Porphyrias are a group of genetic disorders caused by problems with how your body makes a substance called heme. Heme is found throughout the body, especially in your blood and bone marrow, where it carries oxygen. There are two main types of porphyrias. One affects the skin and the other affects the nervous system. People with the skin type develop blisters, itching, and swelling of their skin when it is exposed to sunlight. The nervous system type is called acute porphyria. Symptoms include pain in the chest, abdomen, limbs, or back; muscle numbness, tingling, paralysis, or cramping; vomiting; constipation; and personality changes or mental disorders. These symptoms come and go. Sound familiar?"

"Yes, aside from the skin lesionsâ€¦" Koudou said thoughtfully, nodding.

"I think the reason those haven't manifested is because their skin cells are constantly repairing themselves at such an incredible rate, any blisters heal before they become noticeably visible."

"And what is this 'heme' you mentioned?" He asked curiously.

"Heme contains iron and gives blood its red color. The production of heme takes place in the liver and bone marrow and involves eight different enzymes. A shortage of any of those enzymes can create an excess buildup of certain chemical compounds involved in producing heme. The specific type of porphyria is determined by which enzyme is lacking. Those with porphyria often have trouble processing iron. I think, in the case of the rasetsu, iron is not the problem, but nickel, because it is actually the nickel in silver that causes allergic reactions. Like iron, nickel is everywhere, so there's no escaping it. Because their body is constantly fighting against the small but steady amounts of nickel it is absorbing from the environment, in addition to not being able to make enough blood, they are in constant pain. Taking in more blood helps to solve these two problems: 1) it gives them more blood and helps them heal faster and with less pain, and 2) it helps to dilute the nickel, which is the root of the new kind of porphyria that they all seemed to have developed as a side effect.

"In other wordsâ€¦ if we can figure out how to stop the porphyria, then they will lose their sensitivity to light and silver?" Koudou asked with wide eyes, astonished. "I seeâ€¦ that's incredibleâ€¦ so it was the nickel!"

"Yes, but I don't think it will help much with the bloodlust." Sumiko said, frowning. "I think the only way to stop that is to somehow find a way to return their metabolisms to normal again and stop the constant processes of advanced healing and muscle strength. That's why we need to find a way reverse it and turn them back into normal humans. I'm just worried about whether or not it may prove too much of a shock to their systemâ€¦"

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"How is she?" Kazama asked when he finally saw Koudou again several hours later.

"She wore herself out again." Koudou replied with a wan smile. Her work ethic and theories were incredible, but he really shouldn't be letting her do something like this just yet. After much debating he had finally convinced her to leave most of the research to him until she was in a better condition to work on it herself.

"Hnh. She wore herself out, you say? She really cried over that man that much?" Kazama asked with a frown. Koudou blinked as he glanced at him.

"Are you jealous?" He asked. Kazama simply huffed and furrowed his brow as he crossed his arms and looked away.

"You don't find it odd for an oni to care so much about a human?" He retorted.

"Well, for her whole life, up until now, Sumiko thought she was one." Koudou said reasonably. "A strange human, but a human nonetheless. It's just how she is. Once she gets attached to someone, she feels responsible for them."

"Hmph. Koudou." Kazama said with a rueful smirk ghosting on his lips, as he closed his eyes. "You have a daughter and have lived with that woman for two years, but it seems you know even less about women than I." The smirk fell from his lips as he opened his crimson eyes. "The komainu is obviously in love with that man."

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Kazama was in dark mood as he stalked toward Sumiko's room. He slide the door open with more force than necessary, startling her awake.

"Kazama-san, whatâ€¦!?" Sumiko began to ask, furrowing her brow, as she pushed herself up into a sitting position, when Kazama reached out and grabbed her tightly by her uninjured shoulder and tilted her chin up so that she was looking him directly in the eye as he spoke.

"I've just had an idea." Kazama said, smirking, as he stared down at her confused expression. "I was going to bring Yukimura Chizuru over to our side, by force if necessary, butâ€¦ perhaps I can be persuaded

to change my mind, if you accept my proposal."

"Proposal?" Sumiko asked, frowning, as her confusion deepened.

"I will stop pursuing Yukimura Chizuru if you will consent to take her place as my bride." He stated seriously. Sumiko's eyes widened in shock.

"What? But Iâ€"

"You are very strong for a half oni." He said firmly. "And any children you have with another oni will be stronger still. The strength of our blood is cumulative when not spread thin and diluted with human blood. What's the matter? Don't you want to save your friend?" He taunted when she hesitated to answer, feeling a little mean-spirited in his jealousy.

"Of courseâ€| but this is marriage you're talking about." Sumiko said, furrowing her brow. "Till death do us partâ€"that's a big decision! You can't just drop that on me so suddenly and expect an immediate answer. I need time to think it overâ€|"

Kazama narrowed his eyes as he continued to stare down at her stoically. After a tense moment of silence, he finally released her.

"Very well." He said as he stood up and turned to leave. "I'll give you until you've fully recovered to think it over." He couldn't do anything to an injured woman anyway. "â€| Don't try to run from me, komainu." Kazama said sternly as he paused in front of the open door and glanced back at her. "That's your only warning." He shut the door behind himself, and Sumiko flopped back down onto her futon, wincing slightly from the impact.

"That's not much of choiceâ€| What the hell am I supposed to do now?" She wondered aloud as she stared up at the ceiling. Run away? As if she could in her condition! Before she could try anything that risky, she was going to have to bide her time until she was in much better shape. 'I'll worry about that once the deadline's closer.' She decided, hoping Kazama wouldn't try anything until then. 'For now, I'll use the time I'm stuck here to work on that cure...'

## 46. Little Talks

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 46: Little Talks<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>A couple of weeks laterâ€|<strong>

To Sumiko's surprise and relief, Kazama had been doing a rather good job of behaving and keeping his hands to himself, though he would occasionally do something to tease her, as if he found her reactions amusing. He had also gotten in the habit of bringing the cat with him once he realized she talked more with it around to distract her.

"It still feels kind of surreal to be sitting here with you like this so peacefully." She commented as they sat out on the porch outside her room together. She was well enough to get up and walk a little on her own now, and if she had to keep staring at the ceiling much longer, she was going to start ripping the threads out of the tatami mats. "You haven't been acting like your usual self."

"Then, how should I behave? Do you want me to attack you?" Kazama asked, leaning in close.

"Um, no. That's okayâ€¦ I actually really appreciate you acting like a gentleman." She said as she leaned back, sweat-dropping.

"I'm surprised you haven't tried to escape." He commented as he took the hint and backed off, looking slightly disappointed that she hadn't given him the green light to pounce.

"Well, you gave me a really ominous warning not to, remember?" She replied, feeling a little chagrined that he seemed to think it was sign she was getting attached to him. Well, maybe she wasâ€¦ sort ofâ€¦ in a Stockholm syndrome kind of wayâ€¦

"I'm still waiting to hear your answer."

"And I'm still thinking about it."

"Why are you so against me?" Kazama asked, frowning. She would allow herself to be shot and stabbed in order to protect her friend, yet she wouldn't agree to marry him?

"Osen-chan's right. You really don't know anything about women, do you?" Sumiko asked, raising an eyebrow at him. "When some random guys show up in the middle of the night saying they're there to take you away, whether you like it or not, the first thought to flash through any normal girl's mind isn't: 'Oh, how romantic!' It's: 'Rape!'. Your presentation left a lot to be desired. No matter how good your intentions, there's no way we'd trust you after that. How do I know you won't go back on your promise to leave Chizuru alone after I give in to your demands?"

"Because Oni always keep their word." He answered seriously, frowning slightly as he realized just how terrible their first impression of him had been. "Maybe you think that I'm an animal or a beast. But Oni do value manners and old tradition. If I am to make you mine, it won't be at just any time or place, so don't worry about it. I'll keep my word." He said resolutely, staring out into the courtyard. Sumiko watched him for a moment in silence before replying.

"Okay." She said with a small smile. She could see that he was seriously trying, even if his methods were a little out of whackâ€¦ but she was starting to suspect most of his perceived callousness was due more to a lack of common sense than malice. He had probably grown up a well educated but sheltered young master, which left him a bit socially inept now that he was an adultâ€¦

"You should be careful when you smile like that." Kazama warned her with a frank tone. "It makes people want to push you down."

"Eh?" Sumiko said, blinking, as her smile fell. 'Does that mean he's

thinking about pushing me down right nowâ€¦? Uwah! This guy really is dangerousâ€¦!'" "Ah, umâ€¦ can I ask you a personal question?" She asked, clearing her throat nervously as she tried to think of a way to shift the subject to something less dangerous for her. "Why are you so against us being with the Shinsengumi? Why do you have such a problem with the idea of us getting along with humans?"

"Don't you have any self-awareness as an oni?" He asked, furrowing his brow as he glanced at her. "Oni may appear to be the same as humans, but our wounds heal in seconds, and we can break out unexpected power if we let our rage out. So humans will treat us like monsters and use us."

"They would never do that." Sumiko stated calmly with an unnerving certainty. "Hijikata-san and the others are not those kind of people."

"For humans, oni will always be oni. Those Bakufu dogs will do the same thing sooner or later. No matter what they say or do now, they'll eventually reveal themselves. Those crude intentions are always hidden in the painful essence of humans."

"Hmph. You think I don't know that?" Sumiko asked calmly, surprising him, as she looked up with a rueful expression on her face. "I've been living with humans this whole time. Did you really think I survived this long by being naïve? Of course there will be people who want to use you and hurt you. That's the way of the world. Being shunned or bullied just because I'm different is something I've had to deal with since day one. I've always known I was a freak. Nothing's changed. The only difference between now and then is that now I know why. The way the world works, the way people are, and how I fit into that bigger pictureâ€¦ none of that's really changed." She smiled slightly. "But it's because of everything I've been through, that I can tell the people I can trust apart from the people I can't, and I can say with certainty that the men of the Shinsengumi are honorable and trustworthy. I can sit here with you right now without having to constantly worry about Chizuru because I know she's with them."

"Even if they're on the losing side?" Kazama asked. "You said the Bakufu will fall."

"The Bakufu will fall, but until then, they'll continue to fight, and they'll protect Chizuru with their lives. That's the kind of men they are." Sumiko said with a sad smile. "They're my friends, and I want to save them, butâ€¦ I'm starting to get the feeling that whatever I'm going to do has already been done, since I know how this endsâ€¦ but that doesn't mean I can let my guard down just yet. Right now, at this moment, time is still in flux. Whatever's going to happen hasn't happened yet, so I still have to be careful not to screw everything upâ€¦ The outcome of this war is important to the future of the whole country. I guess it's sort of like that feeling you sometimes get when reading a book. If you skip ahead, you'll know the ending, but even so, if you're in the middle and something bad is about to happen, you can't help but think 'No, this isn't over yet! It can't end this way!' or 'Things are going well. I can't see why the ending has to be so sad.' Even though you know what's coming, while you're experiencing the story through the characters' eyes, you can't help but feel like there's more to the story than what's been written as their predestined path. There has to be some way of escaping it."

Until you turn the next page and see what's written there, anything is possible because time is still in flux for those characters. You don't know what else is written yet. It's kind of like that, if that makes any senseâ€|"

"It does, a littleâ€| but mostly it doesn't." Kazama replied, frowning slightly in confusion.

"Well, I guess what it really boils down to is, I don't think I can change the future, and I don't think I should. While I was still with them, I was determined to see it through and accompany them to the end, but now that I've been awayâ€| I think I might be a little scared to go back. I'm so tired of watching the people I care about die." Sumiko said with a heavy sigh, cradling her face in her hands. "It feels like everyone I care about ends up leaving me too soonâ€|"

"â€| Who have you lost?" Kazama asked quietly.

"I lost my parents the day I was bornâ€| Then I lost Annie when I was eight. She eventually had to quit and leave after being diagnosed with MD, a type of inherited disease that causes muscle weakness and muscle loss. Some forms of MD appear in infancy or childhood. Others may not appear until middle age or later. The different types can vary in whom they affect, which muscles they affect, and what the symptoms are. All forms of MD grow worse as the person's muscles get weaker. Most people with MD eventually lose the ability to walk. There's no cure. She left so I wouldn't have to watch it happen." She said, bowing her head sadly. "The Miyagawas died a few months before I came here in a traffic accident. They were hit by a drunk driver, but at least it had been quick, not drawn out like Annieâ€| You keep calling me a komainu, but I'm not that great. The truth is, I'm actually really selfish. I'd rather die protecting someone I care about than have to be the one that survives and gets left behind again. I've had enough of that." Kazama stared at her for a moment in silence.

"I won't leave you behind." He said solemnly, causing her to glance up at him. "I won't die before you, either."

"â€| Promise?"

"I promise." Kazama vowed gravely as he stared into her deep, dark eyes. Sumiko smiled wanly. Normally that would be that last thing you'd want to hear from a kidnapper, but for some reason, it felt reassuring coming from him.

"I've heard similar promises beforeâ€| But when you say it, I feel like I can believe it."

Kazama smiled slightly.

"That's because you can." He said loftily.

"Because an oni always keeps his word?" She asked wryly.

"Now you're catching on." He said with a smirk.

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 47: Iris<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Later that evening, Sumiko was sitting out on the porch and staring up at the night sky, taking a short break from reviewing Koudou's notes on the research he had been conducting for her, when an ominous feeling suddenly came over her. She lowered her head and furrowed her brow when she saw who standing in the courtyard, only a few feet away from her.<p>

"Nagumo Kaoru." She said, narrowing her eyes at Chizuru's twin brother. He smirked.

"I heard you were sharp."

"I heard you were the one who gave Okita the Ochimizu and arranged for those riflemen to give us trouble."

"Hnh. So, he told you, did he? I had heard he survived. I suppose he has you to thank for that."

"I already know you have some kind of grudge against Chizuru, so what is it you want from me? Why are you here?"

"If you already know, it makes things easier. Join me."

"Excuse me?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow. She had to have misheard that.

"Koudou told me about you. We're not that different, you and I. You know what it's like to suffer. Why should Chizuru be the only one who is loved and protected?" He asked with a manic gleam in his eyes as he closed the difference between them. "I've been watching the two of you for a while now. I know she stole the man you love from you. Don't you want for her to have a taste of despair as well?" He asked, leaning in close to whisper into her ear. Sumiko closed her eyes.

"You think she stole Hijikata-san from me? Is that what it looked like?" She asked, opening her eyes again to glare at the little jerk with the same face as her friend. "Hijikata-san fell in love with Chizuru on his own, and since loved him too, I decided to let her have him."

"But it's not that simple is it?" He asked, straightening up to look her in the eye while he gauged her reaction. "You still love him, and it still hurts. Without Chizuru in the picture, that man could be yours."

"Nice try." Sumiko said with a bitter smile. "But that's a dream I've already woken up from. Even if I wanted to hurt Chizuru, which I never would, getting rid of her wouldn't stop him from loving her. If he picked me after that, he'd just be settling, and I don't want that. Of course he'd prefer Chizuru. She's a yamato nadeshiko. I'm

just the weed growing through a crack in the sidewalk. Yes, it hurts to admit defeat. It hurts a lotâ€¦ but I like them both, so I want them both to be happy."

"You're lying." Kaoru said, furrowing his brow. "There's no way you could forgive her for something like that so easily."

"I'm not lying." Sumiko replied calmly with certainty. "It's really simple. I just made a choice. I decided I'd rather stay friends with Chizuru than hate two people I care about for something that isn't their fault. You can't help who you fall in love. Just because you love someone doesn't mean you're meant to be together, but those two are. Anyone with eyes can see that."

"But it isn't fair! Why is it always Chizuru!\_?" Kaoru demanded as his face twisted into a sneer, an ugly and hateful expression that she had never once seen on Chizuru's face. Sumiko sighed.

"Oh, you poor unfortunate soul! If you expect the world to be fair with you because you're fair, you're fooling yourself. That's like expecting a lion not to eat you just because you didn't try to eat him. Shit happens. How you react to it is your own karma. Stop acting like a brat and get over it." She scolded him sharply, fed up with his attitude. "If you claim to be her older brother, then act like it. Don't you know why the older ones are born first? It's so that they can protect the little ones who follow."

"Youâ€¦" I said, trembling with his head bowed low. "I thought you, of all people, would understandâ€¦ but if that's how it's going to beâ€¦" He discretely pulled a vial of Ochimizu out of his back pocket and quietly popped the stopper out with his thumb. "You leave me no choice!"

"!" Sumiko gasped in surprise and alarm when he suddenly lunged at her and grabbed her by the face. Her eyes widened in horror when she saw the vial of Ochimizu he was preparing to force down her throat, but before either of them could move another muscle, she was suddenly aware of the sensation of Kaoru's grip loosening on her face as Chizuru's demented twin was ripped away from her and thrown across the courtyard into the pond. Her eyes widened when she found herself staring up at a familiar back.

"Do not touch her." Kazama snarled dangerously at Kaoru as he stood protectively in front of Sumiko.

"Hmph. There's no need to get so angry." Kaoru said as he stood up in the knee-high pond, soaking wet. "Aren't you curious about what would happen if a half oni like her were to drink the Ochimizu? It might make her into a full oni."

"She's fine the way she is." Kazama retorted. There was no way he was going to let this brat corrupt her with that medicine. "But you must have a death wish, to have come so far to anger me a second time. You have already delivered your message from Tosa and received our response. Leave now, and know that If you ever try to lay a hand on her again, I will kill you." He promised, narrowing his eyes, as he placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. Kaoru didn't need to be told twice. With one last bitter sneer, he made himself scarce and disappeared.



Sumiko breathed a sigh of relief after a moment had passed, and she was sure Chizuru's evil twin was gone, about to thank Kazama, when she suddenly felt herself being pushed down. Kazama was looming over her in a rather compromising position, looking rather pleased with himself as he smirked down at her.

"You've made me very happy, Sumiko."

"How's that?" She asked with trepidation, feeling like a deer caught in the headlights.

"You just said you were going to let Chizuru have that man." He reminded her, smirking as he nuzzled her neck, brushing his lips against her soft skin. He had been on his way to see her when he rounded the corner and saw her with Kaoru and happened to overhear part of their conversation.

Sumiko balked. How long had he been listening?

"Whoa! Hold on, just because I've decided to give up on Hijikata, doesn't mean I'm automatically switching to you!"

"Why not?" He demanded with a frown. "Do you still have feelings for that man? You would be happier with me."

"It'd be a lie if I said I felt nothing." She replied hesitantly. "But you're just settling. I don't want you to go after Chizuru, but if she's your first choice, then you won't be happy with me, I'mâ€"

"Who says I'm 'settling'?" He asked sternly, furrowing his brow. "It's true Yukimura Chizuru was my first choice for a bride candidate, but the one I want now is you."

"Impossible." Sumiko whispered as she stared up at him, stunned by his confession.

"Why?" Kazama asked, starting to lose his patience. "Why do you find it so hard to believe that someone might actually want you?"

"Because it's never happened before." She replied quietly, avoiding his intense gaze. It was Kazama's turn to be stunned. "Even in the past, in my own time, I've had trouble with the boys I liked telling me they didn't like me because I was 'too tough', or they just saw me as 'one of the guys'â€ I tried acting more girly once, butâ€ that didn't last long after I ended up having to beat up some punks who picked a fight with us. I couldn't just let them beat him up, but being saved by me wounded his pride, and he dumped me soon afterâ€"

"They've made you insecure." Kazama said, frowning. "Forget about them. Don't waste another second of thought on those fools. A weak man won't know what to do with a strong woman. I'm the only one capable of handling a komainu like you." He finished with a smirk. Sumiko glanced up at him but quickly looked away again as she started to blush.

"You're really okay with someone like me?" She asked a little shyly, surprising herself by how happy it made her feel to finally

hear those words from him of all people.

"Someone likeâ€|? You aren't a weed." He said firmly. "You're a wildflower, strong and beautiful while blooming in the face of adversity. You're like an iris growing in a ditch. Proud and clean, untouched and high above the dirty water its roots were planted in."

"You've gotten a lot better at sweet-talkingâ€|" Sumiko said with a wry smile. Kazama smirked as he pulled her into a full embrace, holding her close.

"Don't worry." He told her, sensing her nervousness when she tensed slightly. "I said I would wait until you were fully healed, but waiting is harder than I thought it would be. Just let me hold you for now."

"Asâ€| As long as it's just holdingâ€|" She replied quietly as her blush deepened. His arms were strong and warm. She didn't feel trapped. Maybe she could come to love himâ€| Sumiko tensed again when she felt his hands start to wander where they shouldn't. "Hey! Watch where you're puttin' those hands!"

#### 48. Burning Bridges

I own nothing but my OC.

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#### ><p><strong>Chapter 48: Burning Bridges<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"Sensei." Sumiko said with a serious expression on her face as soon as she saw Koudou the next morning, when he came to her room with breakfast. Koudou froze as he entered the room and stared at her, shocked.<p>

"Whyâ€| Why is Kazama-san lying next to you on your futon?" He asked with trepidation, looking every bit the part of a father who had just found his daughter in a compromising position, as he struggled to keep ahold of himself and not drop the trays of food. "He \_didn't\_â€|"

"No! As if I would be sitting here so calmly if he hadâ€|" Sumiko said, sweat-dropping as she blushed, embarrassed that he would even think that. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Sensei. He just stayed to keep an eye on me."

"Keep an eye on you? For what purpose?" Koudou asked, furrowing his brow with worry. "You didn't try to escape, did you? Because in your conditionâ€|"

"Shut upâ€|" Kazama grumbled sleepily as he sat up and started rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "It's too early for this much noise."

Sumiko sweat-dropped. He obviously wasn't a morning personâ€|

"What are you doing in her \_bed\_?" Koudou asked sternly.

"Protecting her." Kazama replied succinctly. Koudou stared at him incredulously with a look of blatant disbelief on his face.

"Can't you do that from somewhere else?" He asked, chagrined. Didn't he realize how inappropriate that was?

"No." Kazama replied bluntly, regretting nothing.

"Hey, whoa..." Shiranui said, pausing in the open doorway when he saw where Kazama had spent the night. "Looks like someone had a good night." He commented, smirking.

"Yes, it certainly was." Kazama replied with a smirk of his own.

"Don't say such misleading things!" Sumiko snapped, blushing furiously.

"Ah! You're blushing, so \_something\_ must've happened." Shiranui leered playfully at her.

"It did not!"

"I held her all night long." Kazama said, looking rather pleased with himself.

"You're doing this on purpose!"

"Kazama, you should not tease her so." Amagiri said calmly as he arrived on the scene. "I believe that may be a little too far for a joke."

"She's just being shy. She's an Edo woman. That's how they show their shyness, with denial."

"You're the one who's in denial!" Sumiko mumbled, sweat-dropping.

"I suppose this calls for a celebration. I shall cook some red beans with rice to mark the occasion." Amagiri said as he turned to leave.

"Eh?" Sumiko said, taken aback. He seriously believed that stuff Kazama just made up?

"Sumiko!" "couldn't you have waited a little longer? I'm not ready to give you away yet!" Koudou said, leaning against the wall in his own little corner of woe.

"I!" "I said nothing happened!" Sumiko shouted in exasperation. "Listen to me!\_"

"!"

"Sensei!" "I didn't want to say anything in front of the others, but we need to talk." Sumiko said seriously as she followed Koudou into the room he had set up to use as a lab. Kazama and Amagiri were seeing off Shiranui, who had been called away for business with

Choshu. "It's about Kaoru."

"Kaoru?" Koudou asked as they entered the lab, and he turned around to face her, surprised. "You know about Kaoru?"

"He paid me a visit last night." Sumiko said grimly. "Do you know him, Sensei? Because he claims to know you."

"Ah, Kaoru." Koudou said, looking down. "Kaoru is a pitiful child."

"He's a psychopath, Sensei." Sumiko said flatly, startling him with her callousness. "He tried to pour Ochimizu down my throat last night. If Kazama-san hadn't come when he did, I'd probably be a rasetzu right now."

"Oh, Sumikoâ€¦ I'm so sorryâ€¦ but you have to understandâ€¦ Kaoru has not has an easy life." Koudou said remorsefully. "And it's through my own fault."

"Your fault?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow slightly. "How?"

"â€¦ I am not Chizuru's real father." He confessed. Sumiko was surprised, but she held her tongue, waiting to hear the rest of his explanation. "Years ago, when Chizuru and Kaoru were only small children, their real family, the main branch of the Yukimura clan, was destroyed. But the two of them somehow managed to flee all the way to the village I was living in at the time with our smaller branch of the clan. Some of the others were afraid we might be next. When the Nagumo family caught wind of the incident, they decided to use our desperate situation to their advantage. They said that if we let them take one of the twins into their family, they would forgive us for the 'incident' with your mother. Naturally, they wanted the girl, but after what happened with my sister, I was afraid for Chizuru and what kind of future she would have trapped with those murderers. I resolved to give them Kaoru instead and go into hiding to raise Chizuru myself in order to prevent her from ending up like my sister. I thought Kaoru would be all right since he was a boy, but it seems he suffered a lot due to my selfishnessâ€¦"

"Is that why you gave him the Ochimizu?" Sumiko asked quietly. "Because you feel guilty?"

"That's right." Koudou said, closing his eyes. "I couldn't do anything to help him back then, and it's my fault he turned out the way he didâ€¦ the only way I can make it up to him now is to help him fulfill his dream... Which as it so happens, is also \_my\_ dream."

"Fulfill his dream? What dream?" Sumiko asked as a sudden feeling of dread began to creep over her.

"Why, to revive our clan, of course." Koudou said, opening his eyes. Sumiko took a step back. She didn't like that look in them. That wasn't the Koudou she knew looking back at her.

"And how are youâ€¦" She started to ask, when she caught sight of some of research notes he had left out. "!" Sumiko gasped in alarm as she snatched them up and began scanning them. Her eyes widened in horror. "Senseiâ€¦ these aren't the notes you've been showing meâ€¦"

these aren't for a cure! They're for creating a stronger type of rasetsu! What are you thinking, Sensei!?"

"I was thinking we could use them to revive the clan." He replied with a smile, shocking her. "I must admit, I was at loss after all those failures in the Shinsengumi, but you managed to root out the source of the problem right away!" He said as he turned his back to her and opened a box to pull out a vial of the finished product. "With this we can create rasetsu who can stand in the sun, and it's all thanks to you! I really should have asked for your help sooner."

"I didn't want this, Sensei!" Sumiko said, feeling betrayed. "You know that, so? So how could you use me? You said we were family!"

"We are family!" He said as he placed the vial back inside the box. "Don't you see? I'm doing this for you and Chizuru as well. With these rasetsus, we can wipe out the humans, the same way they tried to wipe us out. Once the humans are gone, we can rebuild our clan with them and pay back the Nagumo clan for what they did to you and your parents."

"Sensei! are you even hearing yourself? You're talking about genocide!" Sumiko said sternly, furrowing her brow.

"You were raised by humans, so you may feel like you're one of them, but you're not." Koudou said as his expression hardened. "The sooner you realize this, the better."

"But I'm not completely oni either, am I?" She retorted. "I'm half of each, so that means I'm part of both worlds. It feels like I'm sitting on a fence with one foot on each side. Up till now, I've only had humans pulling on one leg, but now you oni are pulling on the other. Each side wants me to pick one over the other, but at the same time, I'll never truly belong fully to either side, will I? If you all keep trying to force me to choose, at this rate, I'll be ripped in half. What's wrong with being both? What's wrong with being a little different? If everyone in this world were the same, it'd be damn boring! You guys are always going on about 'oni this' and 'human that', but from what I can see, there's really no big difference between the two where it counts. Oni and humans are both 'people', and people come in all shapes, sizes and attitudes. There are good people and bad people in every group, but one drop of dirty water won't turn the whole ocean black. Weeds can pop up anywhere, in any garden, but that's no reason to stop enjoying the flowers. Sensei, you should know that what you're doing won't make anyone happy, least of all Chizuru. If she knew what you were up to, it'd break her heart. Two wrongs don't make a right. Revenge is empty and destructive. People need to live their lives with a clear conscience. Sometimes, when you try to walk on a straight path, can you end up getting yourself stained with mud. However, as long as we never give up, the mud will eventually dry up and fall off. You've let yourself become stuck in the mud, Sensei." She said, taking a step forward. She held her hand out to him. "Please, let me pull you out. Let's end this before more people get hurt."

"That was quite a speech, Sumiko." Koudou said wanly. "I'm sorry! I didn't realize you would be this adamant about it." He bowed his head and let out a sigh of regret. "I was hoping to take you with me once

you got better" but now I see that's impossible. Our views on the subject are far too different."

"So, no matter what, you still intend to go through with it?" Sumiko asked, furrowing her brow in disappointment.

"And if I say yes? What are you going to do then?" He asked, glancing at her out the corner of his eye as he tucked the box of Ochimizu vials under his arm and turned to face her.

"I'll stop you." She stated solemnly with grim determination. He stared at her for a moment in surprise before laughing.

"Stop me? What are you going to do, kill me?" He asked dubiously. His smile fell when her expression remained the same. She wasn't backing down. "It's such a shame, Sumiko." He said sadly.

"!" Sumiko exclaimed when he suddenly shoved her back harshly with his free hand, sending her stumbling back out of the room. Sumiko winced as she scrambled to get back onto her feet, but before she could re-enter the lab, Koudou threw an oil lamp at the threshold of the door.

\_CRASH!\_

"I'll tell you right now, Sumiko." Koudou said calmly as the flames blocking her way in began to spread. "There is no cure. Reversing the transformation caused by the Ochimizu this late in the game will kill the host. If you try to save your friends, you'll just end up killing them faster."

"Sensei!" Sumiko cried out, taking a step back as she shielded herself from a gust of hot wind. When she looked back again, Koudou was gone, and the fire was beginning to devour all of his notes and research materials. For a moment, Sumiko just stood there, then she bit her lip and clenched her fists. She turned and ran and began yelling as loud as she could to alert the rest of the castle. "Fire!"

â€"â^žâ€"

They managed to put the fire out before it spread to the rest of the castle, but the entire lab had been destroyed. There was no trace of Koudou or the box of Ochimizu vials he took with him.

"Soâ€| Koudou has betrayed us." Kazama said after hearing Sumiko's account of the events leading up to the fire.

"Indeed. He has strayed from the path of the Oni." Amagiri agreed. "It can't be helped. We will most likely have to kill him."

"W-Wait, hold on! I agree he must be stopped, but do we really have to kill him?" Sumiko asked anxiously, furrowing her brow. "He's still in the planning stages. He hasn't actually done anything yetâ€|"

"You think he will change his mind?" Kazama asked.

"â€| No." Sumiko replied regretfully after reviewing how he had reacted to her pleas to stop. "He won't listen to me, but there's

someone else who might still be able to reach him." She said determinedly, raising her head. "That 'business' Shiranui said he was being called away for, he's headed for Koufu Castle, isn't he? Imperial troops are preparing for another battle in Katsunuma."

"!" Amagiri said, startled that she already knew such privileged information. He glanced at Kazama, wondering if he had told her, since he only appeared to be mildly surprised to hear her mention it.

"And if they are?" Kazama asked calmly.

"Then that's where Koudou-sensei will be." Sumiko said grimly. "If he intends to go through with his plan to make more rasetsus, they'll need blood. I was able to catch a glimpse of some of his notes before they were burned. He's resolved their issues with photosensitivity and silver to some extent, but he hasn't fixed the cause of their bloodlust. And the best place to get large amounts of blood without drawing attentionâ€¦"

"Is the battlefield." Kazama concluded while Amagiri nodded in understanding.

"And alsoâ€¦" Sumiko said hesitantly, hoping she wasn't about to give too much away.

"Also?" Amagiri asked.

"Chizuru will probably be there."

## 49. Burning Bright

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 49: Burning Bright<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>March, 1868<strong>

After spending a day in Hino, the corps left Kondo-san and set out. Kondo-san had received a truly hearty welcome. Including the new enlistees from Hino, their troops had swollen to over 300. At midday, the Shinsengumi and their newly formed corps, the KÃ'yÃ' Chinbutai, stopped to eat and rest in the shade for short while before continuing their march.

"Kondo-san still hasn't caught up with us." Shinpachi announced grudgingly as he walked over to join the others after checking on the troops. "I swear, he must think our journey to Koufu is a vacation or somethin'!"

"Don't be so harsh." Sano said. "Isn't Hino like his old hometown? He probably wants to return in glory."

"And I'm sayin' I wish he'd put more weight on the time and situation!" Shinpachi retorted, furrowing his brow. "We've been so

busy with this war, that we haven't even had time to go after those bastards who took Sumiko! Without her and Yamazaki, anyone who gets shot is a dead man."

"Sumiko-san!" Chizuru said sadly as she and Sano looked down.

"It's not like Kondo-san is just guzzling sake." Hijikata said. "He's also examining the new group of applicants who would like to join us."

"You bastard!" They all looked up when they heard some curse, disturbing the peace of the rest of their group. "I dare you to say that again!"

"I said a lowly new recruit shouldn't throw his weight around!" One of their older members retorted.

"What's going on?" Sano wondered aloud as they glanced over and saw one of the new recruits grab one of their veterans forcefully by the collar of his kimono.

"What was that, you!" The new recruit demanded hotly.

"That's enough!" Shimada said sternly as he rushed over to break up the fight before it could escalate any further.

"You wanna fight!" The new recruit snapped.

"Tch! Not again." Sano said, furrowing his brow in irritation as he got up and left to go help Shimada. "They never learn."

"Damn it." Shinpachi said, also standing up. "When the general's goofing around, the soldiers start slackin' off." He commented bitterly, glancing down at Hijikata as the fight continued in the background. He furrowed his brow when Hijikata remained silent and walked off to help Sano and Shimada. "Stop! That's enough!" He shouted as he jogged over to them. "Don't fight amongst yourselves!"

"Vice-commander," Saito said after a moment, "I will skip straight to the point."

"What is it?" Hijikata asked as he and Chizuru glanced at him.

"Do you think we can win this battle?" Saito asked seriously.

"!" Chizuru gasped.

"If we can hold up in the castle, we have a fighting chance." Hijikata replied, furrowing his brow. "But it would be tough if we fought them head on. Big shots from the Bakufu have provided us with weapons and cannons, but our foes are purchasing cutting-edge weaponry from foreign countries. On top of that, they displayed great morale and skill in Toba-Fushimi. We don't stand a chance against them as we are now." Chizuru's eyes widened.

"Then we will lose this battle?" Saito asked calmly.

"Of course I'll do what I can to see that doesn't happen. I don't



want Kondo-san to experience losing a battle, and we still have to save Sumiko." Hijikata said solemnly. "Heh. But you know I couldn't tell any of this to Shinpachi or Harada." He said with a derisive laugh at the tough situation.

"I understand." Saito replied, bowing his head. Chizuru remained silent. Her brow was creased with worry as she thought about the upcoming battle and what it could mean for everyone she cared about.

'Sumiko-san' I wonder what she's doing now?" Chizuru thought as she stared up into the blue sky. 'I hope she's all right'

"^"

"Are you all right?" Amagiri asked Sumiko when she winced after the supply wagon she was riding on the back of hit a particularly nasty bump. He and Kazama were patiently walking just behind it with the rest of the Satsuma troop that was being sent to meet up with the Imperial forces that were already in Koufu.

"Yeah, fine' but I'm starting to think I might be better off just walking." She commented, sweat-dropping.

"You want me to carry you?" Kazama asked, smirking.

"Thanks, but no. That'd be kind of awkward since I'm not wearing hakama" She replied with a wry smile. He looked like he was thinking something dirty, and they were almost there anyway. Kazama had arranged for her to have a proper woman's kimono instead, so she had to be a bit more careful when running around. It was going to take some getting used to after getting into the habit of constantly acting like a man for so long. The sun was setting, and the stars were beginning to come out as she glanced up at the sky.

"May I ask you a personal question?" Amagiri asked her.

"Hmm, that depends on what it is." She replied.

"Why are you and Yukimura Chizuru so interested in the Shinsengumi?" Amagiri asked. "Even now, despite knowing they will eventually lose anyway, you carefully guard any information you have on them. Is it because you favor the Bakufu over the Emperor?"

"Who's right and who's wrong' it's difficult to say. Everyone has their own ideals and truths to uphold; their own path to follow. There are as many different ways of living as there people in this world. Your way isn't the only way. Just because it's different doesn't mean it's wrong. This world is just like when you look up at the night sky. There are countless stars, each shining with their own light. Some might seem a little bigger and brighter than the others, but they're all beautiful in their own way; they all shine with the same white light together as part of a bigger picture. And that's what makes them so wonderful to look at, don't you think?" She asked as she tilted her head back and looked up at the darkening sky that was rapidly filling up with stars. The two male oni followed her gaze and saw the endless sea of stars and river of light that was part of the Milky Way. "I love stars. You can't see as many of them in the future because there's too many lights in the city. It's the darkness

surrounding them that makes them so beautiful. The darker it is, the brighter they shine. I think people are like that. It's during the times of trouble, when being strong is the only choice you have, that you find out what you're really capable of. You may not think so, but the men in the Shinsengumi are all true warriors. Just watch, and you'll see. They're not stupid. By now they should know they're fighting a losing battle, but they'll continue to fight anyway, because that's who they are. They're all burning brightly while doing their best to defy the odds and carve their own destiny. Who am I to deny them that?" She asked with a wan smile.

"Ah!" Amagiri said as he stared at her, astonished by the beauty and depth of her thoughts and words.

"Amagiri. Don't fall in love with her." Kazama ordered, furrowing his brow slightly when he saw the look of appreciation on the other oni's face as he stared at Sumiko.

"Eh?" Sumiko said as she glanced back at them, blinking. "What did you say?"

"Nothing you need to worry about." Kazama replied coolly.

"Ah!"

"The enemy is already in Koufu Castle!?" Hijikata asked when Shimada returned to camp later that night from scouting ahead with terrible news. They had laid out their campaign map and placed a rock over the castle.

"You sure about that?" Shinpachi asked.

"Hai." Shimada replied grimly. "The enemy general is supposedly a descendant of Kai Takeda, allowing him to form an alliance with the local army. It appears they are preparing to march toward us." He explained, placing another rock on the map to mark their location.

"This sucks! We can't fight here." Sano said, furrowing his brow.

"Yeah. Whether we fight or flee, we can't stay here." Hijikata agreed. "We'll relocate to the side of the highway and set up camp there. Shimada!"

"Sir!"

"Inform Kondo-san of this immediately!" Hijikata ordered.

"I warned you!" Shinpachi said, gritting his teeth. "If we didn't fart around in Hino, the enemy wouldn't have beaten us to the punch!"

"Don't go there." Sano told him. "The damage has been done."

"Tch!" Shinpachi clicked his tongue in frustration.

"I shall awaken the troops." Saito said calmly as he stood up and left to accomplish his task.

When they heard that the enemy had taken Koufu Castle, that night, roughly half of their soldiers defected. Kondo-san did not rejoin them until the morning after learning of the situation.

"Since they beat us there, I think we should pull back." Shinpachi said once they had all gathered to discuss tactics with Kondo.

"I agree with Shinpachi." Sano said. "It takes vastly superior forces to siege a castle."

"I shall follow my orders." Saito said calmly.

"We will not retreat." Kondo stated resolutely.

"!" Sano and Shinpachi said, staring at him with wide eyes. Did he know what he was saying!\_?\_?

"We will set formations here and see how the enemy responds." Kondo continued on, as if he hadn't heard them.

"Wait a damn second!" Shinpachi said, slamming his hand on the table.

"We accepted financing from the Shogun before setting out. It would be a disgrace if we had the audacity to turn back now!" Kondo said firmly.

"You want to fight in our current state? Are you nuts!\_?\_" Shinpachi asked incredulously. Did Kondo-san fall off his horse and hit his head on his way over?

"Scared?" Kondo asked calmly.

"!" Shinpachi said, looking as though he had just been slapped in the face. He bowed his head and straightened his spine as he clenched his fists at his side. "You can only say that because you weren't there for the Battle of Toba-Fushimi." He said grimly. "How many subordinates do you think I lost in that battle?"

"Nagakura-kun, are you only going to fight battles in your favor?" Kondo asked.

"Nng!" Shinpachi's eyes widened as he grit his teeth and his self-control finally snapped. "What did you say!\_?\_" He roared furiously as Sano shot out of his seat to intercept him as he lunged for Kondo, trying to prevent him from getting himself into even more trouble.

"Calm down! Calm down, Shinpachi!" Sano said urgently as he fought to restrain his struggling friend, who was practically foaming at the mouth. It was times like this, when he really wished Sumiko was still there to help calm him down.

"Kondo-san! Youâ€"You bastard!\_!\_" Shinpachi cursed as he continued reaching for their commander.

"I'll go to Edo and get reinforcements." Hijikata said abruptly, giving him pause.

"Reinforcements?" Shinpachi asked as he relaxed slightly, turning his attention to Hijikata.

"Yeah. The troop we were supposed to rendezvous with after this is on standby in Edo." Hijikata continued. "Once reinforcements arrive, we can siege the castle! Could you hang tight for a bit longer?" He asked Shinpachi.

Shinpachi stared at him for a moment before letting out a sigh of defeat. Hijikata was earnest in his request.

"After hearing that, I guess I'll have to." Shinpachi relented. Hijikata nodded in appreciation before turning to address their commander.

"Kondo-san, is that acceptable?" Hijikata asked.

"Yeah." Kondo replied, giving him the okay to carry out his plan. Hijikata immediately stood up and left to saddle up. Chizuru stared after him worriedly as he passed her by.

"Hijikata-san." She called out to him, making him pause. "Please be careful."

Hijikata turned back to face her.

"Chizuru, leave as soon as you can."

"Huh?" Chizuru said, taken aback.

"This will become a battlefield soon. Flee to the safest place you can." He told her. He didn't want her getting caught with them if they lost.

"Hijikata-san?" Chizuru said as she stared up at him, suddenly feeling lost.

"I'm sorry I dragged you all the way out here." He said with regret. She would have been better off if he had let her go soonerâ€¦

Chizuru bowed her head. She couldn't leave. Not now.

"I refuse to go." She said.

"You what?" Hijikata said, furrowing his brow.

"I will stay here." She said determinedly, lifting her head to meet his gaze. "I can't run and save myself when everyone else is fighting. Until you come back, I will be Kondo-san's shield and protect him in your stead!"

"I never ordered you to do that." Hijikata said as the crease in his brow deepened, and he had to resist the urge to face-palm. He wanted her out of danger, not directly in its path!

"I know I'm stepping out of line!" Chizuru said urgently. "But I want to help everyone. It's my fault Sumiko was taken last time! Please!" She implored him, bowing deeply at the waist. Hijikata stared at her for a moment and closed his eyes. He knew how she felt. He also

blamed himself.

"Then I order you, as a member of the Shinsengumi, to serve as Commander Kondo's bodyguard."

"Eh?" Chizuru gasped as she raised her head, surprised he had given in so easily.

"Stay with the commander at all times and assist him! I don't hear an answer."

"Hai! I, Yukimura Chizuru, will risk my life toâ€"

"No matter what, don't die." He cut her off firmly.

"Huh?"

"Don't put stupid ideas like becoming his shield into your head. If something happens before I return, collaborate with Saito to get Kondo-san to safety." He couldn't bear it if she ended up like Sumiko. "You'd better not die!"

"Hijikata-sanâ€|"

"Remove your short sword!"

Chizuru was surprised by the request, but she did as he said.

"Unsheathe half of it, with the back facing me." Hijikata instructed her.

"Haiâ€| Like this?"

He did the same with his own, knocking it against hers.

\_SHINNNG.\_

"It's called 'Kincho'. Samurai do this when they swear an oath." He explained.

"It's an oath between samurai?"

"Heh." Hijikata smiled slightly as he slid his short sword back into its sheath and secured it at his waist again. "But neither of us are officially samurai, so we're just copying them. But I vow to you: I will come back! And you will survive and see me again. That is our vow. So have faith in me and wait! Don't you die."

Chizuru smiled softly up at him.

"Hai!"

## 50. The Corridor of Setbacks

I own nothing but my OC.

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## <p><strong>Chapter 50: The Corridor of Setbacks<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"When they heard that the Imperial Army had Koufu Castle, Those Shinsengumi dogs seemed rather shaken." Kaoru said as he sat on the steps of a shrine by the side of the road. They've boasted of their ironclad code, but dissention is growing in their ranks.<p>

"Heh-henh." Koudou laughed through his teeth as he smirked leaning against the inside of the shrine door. "It would seem the time is ripe."

Kaoru smiled slightly as he stood up and left to set everything into motion.

â€"â^žâ€"

A few hours after Hijikata left, a man who had just joined the corps fired at the slowly advancing Imperial Army, which instigated the battle.

Even from the safety of Koufu Castle, Sumiko could hear echoes of the cannons and gunfire as she stood atop one of the ramparts, staring off into the distance in the direction of the battle.

"Are you worried?" Amagiri asked as he joined her. "About Yukimura Chizuru?" Kazama had gone out as a scout, and was keeping an eye open for Koudou while he was at it. He had asked Amagiri to stay behind and guard Sumiko since she still wasn't at her best yet, because she had wanted to go with him to check on the others despite the danger. She could walk around, but fighting was still a bit too much for her.

"Of course. A lot of good men are going to die today. This battle won't last more than two hours. But she'll be all right." Sumiko said with a wan smile. "We all want to protect Chizuru because we care about her, but the truth is she's a lot stronger than weâ€| than\_ she\_ gives herself credit for. And those guys won't die so easily, either."

â€"â^žâ€"

All around them, bullets were flying, and cannons were going off.

"Hang in there!" Shinpachi said as he helped one of his injured men to his feet. "Don't die."

"Don't fall asleep!" Sano said urgently as he knelt beside one of his fallen men, trying to keep him conscious.

"Harada-sanâ€|" The dying man breathed his last.

"O-Oi! Oi!" Sano shouted shakily.

"Hey! Hang in there!" Shimada shouted at another fallen comrade.

"Keh!" Kondo grit his teeth and furrowed his brow as he watched the horrific scene of carnage unfolding before him with Chizuru at his side.

"Kondo-san!" Sano said as he approached them, getting the commanders attention. "Please issue the order to retreat. They're too strong! We can't beat them."

"Fool! Have you grown cowardly in the face of adversity?" Kondo asked sternly. "And you call yourself a man!\_?"

"!" Sano was shocked Kondo would even say something like that to him.

"Commander!" Saito shouted as he ran up, out of breath. "The enemy is flooding in from the south!"

"What!\_?" Kondo said, shooting to his feet.

"They're coming from the north, too!" Shinpachi announced as he rushed over to join them. "At this rate, they'll pull off a pincher attack and wipe us out!"

"Kondo-san! Retreat isn't defeat." Sano said determinedly. "We should pull back for now."

"Keh!" Kondo grit his teeth and furrowed his brow. He wasn't giving up here. "If you are a samurai, you should value your honorable name, not your life! Main forces, follow me!" He shouted as he turned away from them and rushed into battle.

"Kondo-san!" Chizuru cried as her eyes widened. She immediately chased after him and the men he was leading in a charge towards the enemy.

"Charge! Show them our power and spirit!" Kondo roared as he personally led those who followed him into battle.

BOOM!

"Aaaaagh!" Kondo and the men with him cried out when they were thrown by the explosion of a cannon ball landing just behind them.

"Kondo-san!" Chizuru yelled anxiously as she ran toward him. The men with him were all dead. They had been hit by shrapnel from the explosion, but Kondo had been shielded by the body of the young man that had been behind him. As Kondo stirred and pushed himself up into a sitting position, he came to realize this and stared down at the dead young man in shock.

"!" He gasped and began glancing around the frontlines, taking in the horrors of the modern battlefield up close for the first time. The dead bodies of his men were strewn about everywhere many of them were still behind the barricades they had set up as protection from bullets. The smell of gunpowder was heavy in the air. The land was marred and pocked from cannon fire.

"Kondo-san!" Sano said, snapping him out of it. Kondo closed his

eyes and looked up to see Sano standing before him with his hand stretched out to help him up. Just behind him were Shinpachi, Saito, and Chizuru. Slowly, as if still in shock, Kondo reached his hand out and took Sano's so he could help him back onto his feet. "The age of waging war through courage alone is no more!" Sano stated regretfully. "It's over."

"Please!" Shinpachi said earnestly, stepping forward. "Don't make any more of my subordinates die in vain." Kondo squeezed his eyes shut and bowed his head in defeat.

"Retreat." He gave the order.

"I appreciate it, Kondo-san." Shinpachi said seriously. "I'll have the men in the frontlines pull back." He told Sano before rushing off to carry out the much needed order.

"Yeah!" Sano called after him in agreement. "Naturally, as captain of the 10th Division, I'll take the rear." He told the others.

"Harada-san!" Chizuru said anxiously, concerned for their safety.

"Didn't Hijikata-san give you and Saito an important order?" He reminded her. "I'm counting on you." He added with a glance at Saito. Saito nodded, and Sano took off into the fray to help Shinpachi lead what was left of their men to safety.

"Saito-kun," Kondo said with his head still lowered, "The rest is in your hands."

"C-Commander, what do you intend to do?" Saito asked, taken aback.

"I cannot go back alive after letting so many of my men die! I have decided that I shall die here!" He shouted as he turned to run.

"Please wait!" Chizuru shouted as she sprang after him, grabbing onto the sleeve of his haori to stop him.

"!" Kondo said, surprised, as he turned to see who had dared to stop him. "Yukimura-kun! L-Let go!" He told her, trying to pull away. When did she get so strong?

"No!" Chizuru said defiantly as she kept her grip on him with a determined look in her eyes. "Kondo-san, please live! If you die here, what will happen to the Hijikata-san? To the Shinsengumi? As long as we have you, we can try again! That's what Hijikata-san told me. And I was ordered to protect you and live through this!"

"Are you telling me to live in shame?" Kondo asked as he stared down at her.

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped, taken aback. She bowed her head as she released his sleeve. "It may be considerably harder to live and atone for your actions than it is to die. But even so! no, because of that, I want you to live!" She said earnestly, raising her head. "Live for those who gathered under you and died because they believed in



you."

"Yukimura-kun!" Kondo said, stunned. He closed his eyes. "Very well."

"Let's go." Saito said, relieved Chizuru had been able to get through to him.

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Shinpachi and Sano were running toward the front lines together, when they had to take cover from some gunfire.

"You see that?" Shinpachi asked as they ducked for cover.

"Yeah." Sano replied, cautiously glancing over the top of the barricade to make sure their eyes hadn't deceived them. "The enemy troops are pulling back!"

"Why? They should be pushing forward." Shinpachi said, furrowing his brow in confusion.

"Shinpachi, take advantage of this to get your men out of here." Sano told him.

"Got it!"

The two of them split up to take care of business and get their men the heck out of dodge.

BOOM!

"Nng!" Sano cried out in surprise and grunted in pain when he was thrown by the explosion of a cannonball like a rag doll.

"Yo! You're looking awfully pathetic!" A familiar voice commented with a hint of amusement.

!" Sano managed to turn his head and saw the purple-haired gun-slinging oni looming over him.

"What a way to put those good looks to waste!" The oni teased with a smirk.

"Shiranui!" Sano said, furrowing his brow.

"I was keepin' an eye on those Tosa guys to make sure they don't steal my thunder, and then I saw you! I was thinkin' we could play." Shiranui said. The spearman would make a much more interesting opponent than any of the other poor saps out there.

"This is just perfect." Sano said with a dark smirk as he pushed himself onto his knees and grabbed his spear. "I'll have you tell me where you guys are holding Sumiko!" The oni smirked.

"Heh! You don't have to worry about that woman." Shiranui told him. "We're taking good care of her. But go ahead and try, if you think you can!"

## 51. The Enemy of My Enemy

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 51: The Enemy of My Enemy<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"Retreat! Don't look back!" Shinpachi ordered his men, evacuating them from the frontlines. "Run!" He turned when he heard the sound of war cries approaching from the other side. "Fresh forces?" He thought aloud, furrowing his brow. Is that why the enemy had pulled back?<p>

â€"â^žâ€"

Meanwhile, Kazama was calmly observing the battle from afar, sitting atop a tree on the side of one of the surrounding hills so he could have a bird's eye view of the entire affair. So far, there was no sign of Koudou, just more humans and their foolishness, bringing death and destruction.

"Hm?" He said, glancing over to the side, away from the battle when he caught something moving out the corner of his eye. He looked down and saw that Nagumo Kaoru was running along a path through the woods. If that brat was working with Koudou, then he might be able to follow him to his locationâ€|

â€"â^žâ€"

"Hah!" Sano shouted as he thrust his spear at Shiranui. Shiranui dodged and fired two shots at Sano.

BANG! BANG!

Sano dodged them both and attacked again without hesitation. Shiranui fired another round as he had to jump up and flip out of the way of his spear.

"Man, can you move!" Shiranui commented as he landed at a safe distance to reload his gun. "Looks like you've been trainin' some."

"Thanks to you." Sano retorted as he shifted his position, getting ready to attack again.

BANG!

A bullet whizzed past Sano's face from off to the side. He turned to see who had fired, and saw that they had company, lots of it. And unfortunately for him, the troop of new arrivals were all clad in the uniform of the Imperial Army. The first line of men drew their swords and charged.

"Tch!" Shiranui clicked his tongue in annoyance and furrowed his brow, irritated that their fight had been interrupted. "And this was just gettin' good!"

"Don't mess with me!" Sano shouted as he charged in to meet his new opponents, slashing and stabbing them with his spear. "Hunh!" Sano turned and thrust his spear into the belly of a man trying to sneak up on him from behind. "!" He gasped in astonishment when the man not only grabbed onto his spear, but began pulling it to the side with extraordinary, widening the cut, until it the blade had been completely dragged out from his side. The man yanked the spear from Sano's hand despite the tight grip he had on his weapon and threw it away. Sano gasped as he took a step back and prepared to draw his sword. "What the hell are these guys!\_?" He demanded as the gutted man raised his sword to attack, moving as if his mortal wound were nothing, while another soldier that he had just cut down started to stand back up behind him. His eyes widened as he watched the wound in the advancing man's side heal almost instantaneously.

â€"â^žâ€"

"Eh! Hah!" Shinpachi shouted as he proceeded to cut down the new soldiers that had just arrived, trying to buy more time for his men to escape. "What!\_?" He exclaimed, shocked when the supposedly mortally wounded men he had just attacked suddenly got back up again. One of them raised their heads and stared back at him with glowing red eyes. "They're rasetsus!\_?"

â€"â^žâ€"

\_SLASH!\_

"Go!" Saito urged Chizuru and Kondo as he cut down some of the rasetsus that had come to surround them, locking swords with another.

"H-Hai!" Chizuru said determinedly, glancing at the commander, whom she was standing back to back with. "Kondo-san!"

"Nn!" Kondo nodded in understanding, and they both hurried away so Saito could focus on fighting and not have to worry about their safety while doing so.

â€"â^žâ€"

\_SLASH! THRUST! SLICE! SLASH!\_

\_BANG! BANG! BANG!\_

"Shiranui, what's going on!\_?" Sano demanded as he and the oni fought to fend off the indiscriminate attacks from the Imperial rasetsus. "What are rasetsus doing out in broad daylight!\_?"

"Like I know!" Shiranui retorted sharply as he took out another one. "I didn't bring these guys with me! I only know of one person who'd make freaks like these!"

"Hehhehheh!" They both looked up when they heard laughter. "What wonderful results! I've been waiting for this day to come for so very long." Koudou said with a smirk as he observed the fight safely from behind the lines of his new rasetsus.

"Bastard!" Shiranui cursed.

"Koudou-san!" Sano said, shocked. "Why are you here!?"

"Heheh." Koudou just laughed again at the stunned expressions on their faces.

"Why the hell did you bring these monsters here!?" Shiranui demanded angrily. "Koudou!"

"Hmph. It is hardly proper to refer to them as 'monsters'." Koudou replied sardonically with a smirk. "Rasetsus have become the species that will surpass humans."

"What?" Shiranui said, furrowing his brow.

"I have finally fixed their defects!" Koudou explained. "They are a new breed that can work under the light of the sun!"

"!" Shiranui and Sano gasped when they realized how high the sun had risen in the sky. Most normal rasetsus would be really suffering just to stand at this time of day, but these were fighting at full strength!

"With my Rasetsu Corps, reviving the Yukimura clan will not end as a dream." Koudou said.

"\_You\_ created these soldiers?" Sano asked.

"Well, I had some help from Sumiko." Koudou admitted to his shock. "Though, at the time, she thought I was helping her find a cure for your friends. I don't think it ever crossed her mind that I would use her theories for this, but I couldn't have done it without her."

"Koudou, damn you!" Shiranui said, furrowing his brow as he grit his teeth.

"The age of a new breed of oni is upon us." Koudou declared.

“^”

Chizuru panted as she ran with Kondo through the woods, but they suddenly had to stop short when they saw a young man standing in the middle of the path, surrounded by the dead bodies he had slain while waiting for them.

"A tracker?" Kondo said, drawing his sword.

"Ah, please wait!" Chizuru said after taking a second look. "You're!"

"I finally get to see you again, Chizuru." Kaoru said with a small smile as he looked at his twin sister.

"Yukimura-kun, do you know him?" Kondo asked.

"Hai. We met back in the capital." She replied. "But, Kaoru-san, why are you dressed like that? What are you doing here?"

"I see!" So Okita never told you." Kaoru said, closing his eyes. Neither had Sumiko, apparently. Did they think they were protecting her by doing so? "This is my true form." He explained. "Everything I have done, from hiding my gender to coming here, it was all for one purpose. Yes, I have come to save my younger sister."

"Your sister?" Chizuru asked, furrowing her brow in confusion.

"I'm talking about you, Chizuru."

Chizuru gasped as her eyes widened. Kondo glanced at her in surprise as she stared up at her twin brother.

"My face isn't proof enough for you?" Kaoru asked her. It hurt that she was still looking at him with doubt when strangers who meant nothing to him had easily been able to spot the family resemblance. "Then, let me use this Katana as evidence." He said, removing his sword so he could hold it up for her to see. "My Daitsuren is the mate to your Shotsuren."

"!" Chizuru gasped when she saw that what he was saying was true. His katana matched her kodachi perfectly, as if they were meant to be part of the same set.

"You should be aware that these swords have been passed down through the Yukimura clan for generations." Kaoru added.

"But I—" father never told me." Chizuru said, looking down. Kaoru sighed.

" 'Father', huh?" He said, closing his eyes briefly before looking at her with pity for the depth of her ignorance. "Koudou is not our true father."

"Huh?" Chizuru gasped with wide eyes, shocked to the core.

"—"

Koudou laughed, smirking as he watched Sano and Shiranui continue their struggle against his new and improved rasetsus. Yes. It was all going according to plan.

"Damn monsters!" Sano cursed as he stabbed another through the heart with his sword. He was staring to get winded.

"No matter how many I kill, it doesn't put a dent in their numbers!" Shinpachi shouted in frustration. He was much closer to the others now. They were all being penned in by the rasetsus that had surrounded them.

BANG!

"The age of a new kind of oni?" Shiranui asked incredulously as he put down another rasetsu with a bullet to the brain, which turned out to work about just as well as one to the heart. He kicked yet another away when it charged at him and shot it. "Japan's screwed if we have monsters like this running out and about. Harada! Time for a temporary truce! We gotta deal with these fakes!" He shouted, taking out the one Sano was currently locked in battle with for him. The

moment the rasetsu was down, Sano turned and hurled his sword in Shiranui's direction. Shiranui didn't even flinch as it soared right past his head and stabbed the rasetsu that had been trying to sneak up on him from behind.

"No objections here." Sano told him.

"Heh." Shiranui smirked as they both turned and began devoting their full attention to battling the new rasetsus while backing each other up this time. Koudou turned his back on the fight and quietly slipped away.

“あゝ”

"After the Yukimura clan of oni was obliterated for refusing to aid an anti-Bakufu faction, you were taken in by Koudou, who was from a branch off of our clan." Kaoru continued to explain to Chizuru. "That is when I was taken away by the Nagumo clan of Tosa. We were torn away from each other. See, currently I am trying to revive the Yukimura clan with Uncle Koudou."

Chizuru gasped again at mention of her father's name. She didn't want to believe what Kaoru was saying. She didn't want to believe her kind father had been lying to her all these years. She didn't want to believe he had anything to do with this“|

"If he uses the modified Ochimizu, he can create a Rasetsu Corp that has overcome their weaknesses. We can use them to exterminate humans and create a world of oni." Kaoru stated.

!" Chizuru and Kondo gasped, horrified. Kondo grit his teeth and tightened his grip on his sword.

"By now, your buddies are probably all dead." Kaoru said loftily.

"What did you say“|?" Chizuru asked, looking extremely wounded.

Kaoru smirked slightly. Yes. That was the expression he had wanted so much to see. His smirk fell when Kondo stepped protectively in front of Chizuru.

"Kondo-san!" Chizuru said.

"Yukimura-kun, run!" Kondo told her.

"No“| I can't!" She objected. She had promised Hijikata she would stay with him.

"Do it! Hurry!" Kondo ordered urgently, equally determined not to let anything happen to her. Kaoru furrowed his brow and narrowed his eyes dangerously at the man in front of him.

"I won't hold back on any who stand between Chizuru and I." Kaoru said darkly. "Even if you are the commander of the Shinsengumi." Kondo let out a yell and charged, but Kaoru easily read his movements and dodged his attack.

!" Kondo grit his teeth as he struggled to keep ahold of his sword

when Kaoru tried to use the sheath of his own to knock it from his hands. Failing that, Kaoru thrust his sheathed sword hard into Kondo's diaphragm, sending him reeling backwards.

"Kondo-san!" Chizuru cried out in alarm, rushing over to check on him.

"Now do you understand?" Kaoru asked as he approached them. "I'm the only one who can protect you. Come! Join me. Chizuru!" She stared up at him with wide eyes, trembling, as he reached out his hand to her. "Come now."

SMACK!

"!" Kaoru gasped, staring at the hand Chizuru had just slapped away, stunned. "Chizuru?"

"Stop it, Kaoru-san." Chizuru said solemnly, remaining by Kondo's side. "I made a promise. I swore to protect Kondo-san and survive. We may be siblings, but I will fight you!" She said determinedly, steeling her resolve as she stood up and drew her short sword. Kaoru took a step back in shock, looking stricken. Her hands trembled as she pointed her sword at her long lost brother.

"You would draw your blade against your brother who shares your blood?" Kaoru asked, furrowing his brow.

"Sumiko-san said you don't have to be blood to be family. Please step aside, Kaoru-san." Chizuru said resolutely, tightening her grip on her short sword. She didn't know Kaoru. She didn't remember him. What she did know was the kind father who had raised her, and the brave men from the Shinsengumi who had become her friends and protected her. And she wasn't about to betray Hijikata-san by abandoning Kondo-san! She made a promise, and she was going to keep it.

"Do you realize how hard I worked to find you?" Kaoru asked. "Chizuru, I love you!" He said passionately. As much as he hated her and envied her for forgetting him and being the only one to be protected all these years, he still loved her. He loved her just as much as he hated her. "Don't you realize? And here you are! You would rather protect those humans than your own oni clan!?" He demanded as his voice trembled, drawing his sword.

CLANG!

He charged forth, locking swords with Chizuru. The force of his blow sent Chizuru stumbling back, but she corrected her stance and stood firm, furrowing her brow with grim determination as Kaoru charged at her again.

CLANG! \_CLASH!\_ CLANG!

"Nng!" Chizuru grit her teeth as she struggled to keep up with her brother and block the attacks from his long sword with her short sword. "Ah!" She cried out when the next blow knocked her sword from her hands and sent her tumbling onto her back. Chizuru pushed herself back up into a sitting position, breathing heavily. "!" She gasped when Kaoru she looked up and found Kaoru's sword in her face, only an inch away.

"I'll only say this once more. Chizuru, come with me!" He pleaded earnestly.

"I can't. Iâ€¦ made a promise." She said nervously as a bead of sweat rolled down the side of her face.

"I seeâ€¦" Kaoru said. "In that caseâ€¦ I willâ€¦" He straightened up and raised his sword. "I he couldn't have her, no one could. "With my own two hands, I willâ€¦!"

\_SWISHâ€¦\_CLANG!

Chizuru gasped as Kaoru's eyes widened in surprise when they realized who had just suddenly jumped in to block the finishing blow.

"Okita-san!" Chizuru exclaimed. It was Okita-san in his rasetsu form, and he was wearing the Western clothing Hijikata-san had left for him once he got better!

"You're awfully persistent." Okita commented, narrowing his red eyes at Kaoru, grinning, as he forced him back.

"Back at you, Okita." Kaoru said, furrowing his brow as he retreated to a safer distance. A really troublesome guy had showed up. "You're doing well for being under the sun." He remarked with a dark smirk. "It must be hell."

"Hnh! That's why I've got to be quick about killing you!" Okita retorted, matching his smirk as he charged forward.

## 52. The Distant Face

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 52: The Distant Face<strong></p>

\* \* \*

><p>BANG!<p>

Shiranui fired his last round and opened his gun to reload, reaching into his pocket for more bullets. Unfortunately, he only had one left.

"Tch!" He looked around for something else he might be able to use and spotted a wagon that was still loaded with crates of gunpowder. He jumped up and landed beside Sano as he took out another rasetsu with his spear. "Hey, Harada. Whatcha think of me drawing the fakes' attention while you carve a path for your men to escape?"

"But then, you wouldâ€¦!" Sano said, furrowing his brow.

"Don't lump me together with you weak humans." Shiranui said coolly. "I'm not so lame as to let myself get devoured by these failures." He smirked as he let out a war cry and charged for the wagon, aiming his gun at its explosive load.



"Shinpachi! Guys! We're retreating!" Sano shouted to the others.

"Gooooo!" Shiranui shouted as he fired his gun, setting off a chain reaction of explosions as each box set off another, blowing all the rasetus standing too close sky high.

â€ˆâ^žâ€ˆ

CLANG! CLASH! \_SWISH!\_

Okita and Kaoru were locked in battle, constantly blocking and dodging each others attacks. Kaoru took another swipe at Okita, but he dodged it with ease, grinning, as he charged forward again, forcing Chizuru's annoying brother further and further away from her and Kondo-san with a series of powerful blows. It was all Kaoru could to block him. Kaoru grit his teeth and furrowed his brow as locked swords with Okita again, but Okita wasn't having that, he applied more pressure behind his blade and forced Kaoru's sword aside.

"!" Kaoru gasped in alarm when he was thrown off balance and sent stumbling back. Okita smirked as he let out a war cry and lunged at him with a predatory gleam in his eyes, ready to end him.

\_THROB.\_

"Ugh!" A wave of searing pain suddenly wracked Okita's entire body, sending him to his knees as his hair and eye color returned to normal. This latest fit of violent coughing was so bad that he couldn't hold his rasetu form!

"Didn't I warn you?" Kaoru said as he straightened up, relieved for the reprieve in Okita's fierce attacks. For a second there, he thought he might really die. "The Ochimizu can't heal your tuberculosis." He stated haughtily.

"!" Kondo and Chizuru gasped in alarm as Okita continued to cough, unable to even lift his sword.

"Chizuru, behold." Kaoru said as he walked over to Okita with renewed confidence. "You have to toss aside the weak and kill them, like this!"

"Okita-san!" Chizuru cried, rushing forward as her brother raised his sword high, preparing to strike him down.

"Souji!" Kondo yelled.

\_"Don't do it!"\_ Chizuru screamed.

\_STAB!\_

"Hah!" Chizuru gasped as her eyes widened in shock, along with Kondo's and Okita's. The tip of a sword was protruding from Kaoru's chest. He had been stabbed from behind before he could slay Okita. Kaoru's eye twitched as he stared ahead, wide-eyed. It hurt to move, but he lowered his arm and struggled to turn his head despite the pain so he could see the face of his killer.

"Kazama Chikage!" He groaned, furrowing his brow as he did his best to glare at the oni. With great effort, Kaoru reached up with shaking hands for the blade that was piercing his chest, trying to grab hold of it.

"Losing your pride as an oni and dirtying the Yukimura name is unforgivable." Kazama said sternly, pulling his sword back out of Kaoru's chest, letting the younger oni fall to the ground with a harsh thud. Kaoru trembled and lifted his head off the ground to look up at his sister.

"Chizuru!" Kaoru called out weakly, struggling desperately just to crawl over to her. "Chizuru! Chizuru!"

"Ah!" Chizuru gasped.

"Chizuru! Chizuru! Chizuru!" why?" He asked as he craned his neck to look up at her with tears in his eyes.

Chizuru's face flushed slightly as she stared down at him and tears began to form in her own eyes. It was too sad. It was too pitiful. As she stared down at him like that, a long forgotten and repressed memory of the two of them playing together in a flower meadow as toddlers resurfaced. A little boy with a face just like hers was smiling up at her so sweetly as he presented her with a crown of pink wildflowers.

"Why?" Kaoru asked pitifully as tears streamed down his face. "Why was it always you?"

"Kaoru!" Chizuru said sadly as a tear rolled down her cheek. She leaned down to reach out to him, but it was too late. The tips of her fingers were only inches away when he breathed his last and his head dropped to the ground. Her brother was dead.

"I imagine you've heard," Kazama said as he sheathed his sword, "but Koudou has left the Satsuma Domain and strayed from the path of the oni." He informed them, watching as Chizuru knelt down beside her brother's corpse and gently placed her hand on his head. "I also have a message for you from Miyagawa Sumiko."

"Eh?" Chizuru gasped as they all looked up at him in surprise.

"She asked me to tell you not to worry about her if I saw you. Her wounds have almost finished healing." Kazama recited, repeating what Sumiko had said almost verbatim as he reached into his kimono and tossed a thick envelope on the ground in front of Okita. "She made this for you and the other rasetsus like you. Supposedly it will help you against the sun and silver. The instructions are inside. Don't abuse her good will." He said firmly, narrowing his eyes slightly in warning as he turned and walked away, leaving them without a fight.

"Did he just help us?" Kondo asked, confused.

'He said it was from Sumiko-san' but why would he?' Okita started to wonder, when Chizuru suddenly took off running, chasing after the oni. "Chizuru!"

"Yukimura-kun!"

"Please wait!" Chizuru called out as she caught up to Kazama. He paused and glanced back at her. "Sumiko-san is Sumiko-san really all right?" She asked anxiously.

"Yes. You needn't worry. She's being treated well." He replied calmly.

"And that package really is from her?" Chizuru asked. "Why would you give it to us? I thought you hated rasetsus."

"Because she asked me to." He said simply, surprising her. "It's the first time she's ever asked anything of me, and I thought it wouldn't hurt to level the playing field a little." They all wanted those new rasetsus taken care of. Those things were even worse than the ones from the Shinsengumi.

"Please! Please give me some time!" Chizuru requested earnestly, clenching her fists. "Father and I we need to talk." She said, furrowing her brow with determination. She looked a little like Sumiko when she did that. "Even if we are not related by blood, he is my father. He cannot be allowed to use his rasetsus to wipe out humanity. But he may realize the error of his ways if I talk to him. Please!" She said, bowing at the waist.

"Very well." Kazama said, turning to face her. "I shall give you some time." After all, that was what Sumiko hoped for as well.

"Ah! Thank you!" Chizuru said as she straightened up to look at him.

"Never forget: Oni always keep their promises. Act as a proud oni and keep your word." He told her.

"Hai!" Chizuru said resolutely.

That evening, with Kondo-san's help, Chizuru buried Kaoru's body beneath the shade of a blooming cherry tree along with his sword. After that, they somehow managed to make it back to Edo with Okita.

"Welcome back."

Sumiko greeted Kazama when he returned. She had come to wait for him by the gate with Amagiri. "How was it?" She asked, biting her lip nervously.

"Any sign of them?" Amagiri asked.

"I didn't see Koudou personally, but I heard there were rasetsu on the battlefield in broad daylight. I killed Nagumo Kaoru." Kazama stated calmly. "And I delivered your message and that package." He added, glancing at Sumiko.

"Thank you." She said, smiling gratefully at him. She hoped Chizuru wasn't taking the death of her long lost brother too hard. He might have been psychopath, but he was still her brother.

"If you want to thank me, you should hurry up and marry me." He

told her, smirking when she had to look away as she started to blush.

"Wellâ€¦ lately, I've been thinking maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thingâ€¦" She admitted a little shyly, playing with the sleeve of her kimono. Kazama blinked as he and Amagiri both stared at her stunned.

"Are youâ€¦!\_?" Kazama started to ask seriously, when Shiranui came up and clapped him hard on the back.

"Yo!" Shiranui greeted them brightly. "Hey, Kazama, why is that I had to find out about those things from Koudou? A little heads up would've beenâ€¦" He trailed off when he saw the death glare Kazama was giving him for interrupting. If looks could kill, he'd already be six feet under, yesterday. "Hold it, why are \_you\_ so angry?"

"I believe they were having a moment, before you interrupted them." Amagiri replied calmly.

"Heh?" Shiranui said, smirking, as he glanced between Kazama and Sumiko. "Is that so? You decided to accept his proposal?"

"I-I'm seriously considering itâ€¦ Oh! Look at that, time for dinner!" Sumiko replied nervously, blushing furiously, as she ran off back into the castle to escape from being put on the spot.

"Hmm. She must be nearly healed if she can already run like thatâ€¦" Shiranui said thoughtfully as he watched her go.

\_"Shiranui, \_you bastard\_â€¦!"\_ Kazama muttered darkly, radiating murderous intent as he placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Do you have any idea how \_close\_ I was to finally getting answer!\_?"

"Whoa, hey nowâ€¦" Shiranui said, taking a cautious step back. "We all know a fight between two pureblood oni is a waste of time, right? Right, Amagiri? Back me up here!"

"I agree. It is pointlessâ€¦ but in this case, might I suggest you start running?" Amagiri called out in response, already a safe distance away from Kazama's wrath.

"Wha!\_? You traitor!" Shiranui shouted incredulously.

"Um, guys, dinner really is ready, so if you don't hurry it'll get cold. I helped make it today, soâ€¦" Sumiko said, poking her head out from behind the gate. "â€¦ What are you doing?"

"â€¦ Nothing." Kazama said calmly, turning his back on Shiranui to join her. "What did you make?"

"I made that dish I mentioned the other day that my adopted mother used to make for me." She replied with a smile.

"Oh, that 'omuletu' thing?" He asked.

"It's 'omelet', but yeah. I made some rice to go with it, so it's actually 'omu-rice', but there's no ketchup, so I couldn't draw faces on the eggsâ€¦"

"Why do they need faces?"

"Because it's more fun that way."

"â€|" Shiranui said as he stared after them, stunned. "She has no idea how amazing it is that he actually stopped, does she?"

"Miyagawa Sumikoâ€| is a woman to be reckoned with." Amagiri stated seriously, impressed.

"She'd better marry him, or it's gonna get uglyâ€|" Shiranui commented with a sigh.

### 53. Dust to Dust

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 53: Dust to Dust<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"The age of a new breed of oniâ€| Sensei really said that?" Sumiko asked, frowning, as she furrowed her brow with worry once they had heard Shiranui's account of what had happened on the battlefield. She knew he had an axe to grind with humans, but now he was trying to replace oni, too? "I'm starting to feel like I don't know him at allâ€|"<p>

"He has strayed too far from the path. Yukimura Koudou must be dealt with." Amagiri said solemnly.

"I promised Yukimura Chizuru that would give her time to talk to Koudou." Kazama stated calmly. "She seems to think she can talk him out of it." He was rewarded with a grateful smile from Sumiko.

"Thanks. I appreciate it." She said, bowing her head.

"Hmm? That was awfully nice of you, Kazama." Shiranui commented with a sly smirk before adopting a more serious expression. "But I don't think we can afford to wait too long..."

"ARRRRRGHH!"

"!" Their heads all immediately snapped up when the echo of a deep, gut roar reached their ears.

"The hell?" Shiranui said dubiously.

"That sounded like a rasetsu!" Sumiko said, alarmed.

"Are you sure?" Amagiri asked. She nodded.

"I've heard one like that before. That's what they sound like when they've snapped."

"But what is a rasetsu doing in this castle, I wonder!" Kazama thought aloud to himself as he stood up and headed for the door. The other three quickly got up and followed him, wanting to see what was going on for themselves.

"Would it not be better for you to wait in the room?" Amagiri asked Sumiko as they walked.

"You want me to sit in there all by myself when there could be a monster on the loose?" She asked, raising an eyebrow at him. "Right now the safest place in this castle is with you all. Although, I think if given the choice between humans and oni, they'll instinctively target the oni!"

"What do you mean?" Shiranui asked. "Why would they do something stupid like that? Humans are obviously the easier prey since they're weaker."

"Maybe, but broken rasetsus aren't exactly in their right minds." She pointed out. "And a while back, a rasetsu got loose at the Shinsengumi headquarters, but instead of attacking those closest to it, it wandered all the way to the room I was staying in with Chizuru, and of the two of us, it went for her first, even though I was slightly closer to it. It went out of its way to try to get to her blood, and the only reason it would do that!"

"Is because her oni blood is stronger." Amagiri finished. "I see. That is a valid observation."

"And, also!" Sumiko started to add, when another howl wracked the castle.

"AAARGHHH!"

"It sounds like it's moving." Kazama commented.

"It also sounds like it's getting closer." Shiranui said as a shadow rounded the corner. A rasetsu clad in an Imperial Army uniform came charging at them. Kazama immediately drew his sword, while Shiranui raised his gun, ready to strike.

"Don't kill it!" Someone ordered from around the corner.

"Diaphragm!" Sumiko shouted quickly as Amagiri stepped forward. Following her suggestion, he took it out with a harsh blow to the diaphragm, knocking it out cold, just as human soldiers came rushing around the corner, led by a man who looked uncannily familiar to Sumiko.

"Ah!" She gasped in realization, pointing a finger at him. "Saigo Takamori!" She'd seen pictures of him in the history books!

"You know Saigo-dono?" Amagiri asked curiously.

"Well, I know of him!" She replied, sweat-dropping, as she realized how much attention she had just drawn to herself.

"Ah, good! You stopped it! And it's still alive!" Saigo said, looking

extremely relieved. "You have my thanks. But how ever did you manage it?"

"He punched him in the diaphragm." Sumiko said simply. "Even if their wounds heal at an insane rate, like any normal living being, they'll lose consciousness and black out without oxygen." At least, that had been her theory. "But more importantly, if you're not going to kill him, then shouldn't we do something to restrain him before this guy regains consciousness? He's going to be waking up soon."

"Ah, yes! Bring the rope." Saigo called out to his men.

"Rope?" Shiranui asked dubiously. "Like that's gonna work! What are you all even doing with this thing anyway?"

"You would be safer letting a rabid dog loose in here." Kazama commented.

"Well, were hoping to study it, find out what makes it tick." Saigo said, furrowing his brow. "We've never seen anything like these things before."

"These 'things' were normal humans once." Sumiko said, frowning. She didn't like where this was going.

"What do you know about them?" Saigo asked, narrowing his eyes at her in suspicion. "Who are you?"

"She was Koudou's apprentice and is my fiancée. You would do well to respect her." Kazama said, narrowing his crimson eyes.

"What? Koudou!?! So, you know all about them, then?" Saigo asked, surprised.

"I don't know \_everything\_ Koudou-sensei does, but I suppose I know more than most. If you need someone to study this rasetzu, then I'll volunteer myself for the job." Sumiko said after pausing to think for a moment.

"You will?" Shiranui asked, surprised. Kazama and Amagiri were also giving her questioning looks.

"Well, if you say so. I suppose you are the best qualified, but understand, as we've already been betrayed by Koudou, we can't take any more risks. We'll need to post a guard." Saigo said, nodding his head at them as he turned to leave with the men who were taking away the unconscious rasetzu.

"Why did you volunteer?" Kazama asked glancing down at her.

"I didn't like the way they were talking. I want to make sure whatever 'experiments' they plan on doing are humane." She replied, frowning as she watched them leave. "I've heard Buddhists say even an insect has a half a soul."

"You're Buddhist?" Shiranui asked.

"No, but they've got some good ideas." Sumiko said with a wry smile.

â€"â^žâ€"

After their defeat at Koufu, the Shinsengumi took refuge at a hatamoto mansion.

"Oh." Heisuke said when he slid the door open and found Sano and Shinpachi already drinking sake while Saito sat just outside the room, on the porch, watching the sun set while he sipped from his cup. "Drinking already? You old farts are unbelievable." He commented as he entered the room, followed by San'nan. They hadn't even touched their dinner yet.

"Shut it! How could I \_not\_?" Shinpachi retorted. After everything they had seen and been through in that last battleâ€| There was a lot to drink about!

"San'nan-san, care to join us for a drink?" Sano asked, holding up the container of sake.

"Sure." San'nan said, taking a seat.

"Not gonna invite me?" Heisuke asked.

"You're still too young to drink." Sano told him in retaliation for the 'old farts' comment.

"What was that\_!\_?" Heisuke said indignantly, raising a fist, while San'nan chuckled. "Sheeshâ€|" He said as he sat down. "Kondo-san isn't here today either, huh?"

"Once you're the commander, you have to make plans with the big wigs, gather new recruits, and take care of a shitload of stuff." Sano said.

"It's not like recruiting guys is going to help." Shinpachi said pessimistically. "There's no point if he's going to throw their lives away. Right, Saito?" He asked, glancing at their stoic friend. Saito didn't know what to say, so he remained silent.

"Don't hold it against him." Sano said. "That was Kondo-san's first time leading a battle against the Imperial Army. It's not like everything would go smoothly the first time."

"Hmph. Gathering hundreds of untrained men isn't going to change things." Shinpachi said, furrowing his brow. "There's no way they could fight rasetsus who can move about during the day."

"Furies who can move during the dayâ€|" San'nan said thoughtfully, feeling envious.

"Ah, that's right. I heard Sumiko somehow managed to get Kazama to deliver a little care package for you guys." Sano said. Shiranui had said they were treating her well, but it was a surprise to hear that they were willing to do her a favor like that, since it meant helping them. In that case, he was glad. It meant she wasn't being treated harshly, like a prisoner or worse, as they had all feared. Kazama had also said she was almost healed, and knowing Sumiko, if she really wanted out, she'd probably end up saving herself if she got tired of waiting for them. That thought made him smile slightly.



"Yes. It was basically an outline for a low nickel diet. Apparently she believes our bodies have become unable to process nickel, and that is part of the reason why we are so weak against the sun and silver, but there are no guarantees as to how effective it will be." San'n'an explained. "There was also a note of apology."

"Apology?" Shinpachi and Sano asked, surprised, as even Saito glanced up.

"It seems she played an unwilling part in helping Koudou create these new rasetsus." San'n'an said to their shock. "She had wanted to try making an actual cure for us, so she asked Koudou-san for his help since she was still recovering from her wounds, and he knew more about the Ochimizu than she. Unfortunately, he went behind her back and applied her theories to creating a new breed of rasetsu instead."

"Damn it!" Shinpachi cursed, gritting his teeth in frustration. "Why did Koudou-san have to make those monsters? He even tricked Sumiko to do it!" A heavy silence fell over the room.

"Hm?" Heisuke said when he sensed someone nearby. He glanced towards the open door and saw Chizuru sitting there with the new tray of sake she had been bringing them. "Chizuru!"

"Ah!" Shinpachi looked down uncomfortably while Sano gave him look. He should've kept his big mouth shut!

"I'm sorry." Chizuru said, lowering her head to them.

"Wh-Why are you apologizing?" Heisuke said quickly, jumping to his feet in his haste to reassure her. "Don't sweat it! It's not your fault of nothin'! 'Kay? Sumiko would say the same thing if she were here!" Chizuru didn't raise her head, she just kept staring remorsefully at the floor. "Ch-Chizuru!"

"^"

"How are you feeling today, Tanaka-san?" Sumiko asked the rasetsu, whose name turned out to be Tanaka Souta, as she approached the cell he was being held in. "Has anyone been giving you trouble?"

"No, no trouble! but I'm almost out of that medicine you gave me." He said with a wan smile. "The 'attacks' have been getting worse and are happening more frequently. Oh, and there is a slight ringing in my ears from time to time."

"Yes, I heard as much from the guards! I'll bring you some more. For now, let's check your vitals again." Sumiko said solemnly as she made a note of it for the record. He stepped up to the bars so she could reach in and listen to his heart with her stethoscope. She furrowed her brow slightly in concern. His heart rate had increased again. For some reason, it seemed his heart had steadily begun to pump harder and faster, even during the times when he wasn't transformed. She checked his eyes, ears, tongue, and body temperature. His pupil dilation was off, and his body temperature was strangely low, especially considering how much higher it had been than average only a few days ago. She couldn't see anything wrong with his ears, but the ringing he claimed to hear worried her. That

could indicate blood flow or nerve problems. "How's the pain?" She asked. "Be honest. Don't try to tough it out."

"Well, I'd say the intensity is about the same, but it feels like it's starting to spread from chest and head to my limbs." Tanaka said a bit hesitantly, hoping it wasn't an indication of something worse to come.

"Would you like a pain killer?" Sumiko asked, frowning.

"Yes. I think I may need one very soon." He admitted, looking down. He was just about reaching his limit. "You've been very kind to me."

"Heh. That's not usually what my patients say." She commented with a wry smile. "Most of them complain my bedside manner is too rough, or they tell me I'm too bossy."

"Well, there is that, but, I mean, you actually call me by name and you look me in the eye when you talk to me." He said somberly. "Everyone else here acts like I'm some kind of monster. When I signed up to fight with the army in Tosa, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind. They said we'd become stronger if we drank that medicine, but I never thought"

"I'm sorry." Sumiko said, bowing her head. "It was my Sensei who did this to you. If I had been able to see through him sooner"

"No, no! It's not Miyagawa-san's fault! You?" He suddenly choked on his own words, and fell to his knees. His hair faded to white, and his eyes glowed red.

"Tanaka!" Sumiko shouted in alarm, jumping to her feet. "Hold on, I'll go get the medicine!" She turned to run, but something caught hold of her kimono's sleeve. She turned and saw that Tanaka had reached out and tried to grab her in his frenzy. Her eyes widened when she realized his skin was starting to turn grey like ash, and the fingers holding onto her sleeve began to crumble and fall like grains of sand. Whatever it was spread all the way up his arm and through the rest of his body until all that was left of Tanaka Souta was a pile of dust, which promptly burst into blue flames. No, they only looked like flames. She couldn't feel any heat radiating from them, and the strange phenomena quickly dissipated. "No!" Sumiko said quietly as she fell to her knees in front of the cell. That was impossible! How could a living body just disintegrate like that? And what was with that strange blue light? She couldn't believe her eyes. It didn't feel real. Tanaka couldn't be dead.

"No way!"

## 54. Eternal Loyalty

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 54: Eternal Loyalty<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Late March, 1868<strong>

Saito was inconspicuously tailing San'nan. The deputy-commanderâ€|\_former\_ deputy-commander, had been acting very suspicious as of late, and Hijikata had not forgotten Senhime and Kimigiku's warning that there were rumors their rasetsus were using their night patrols as an excuse to hunt for blood. He was doing well until a cloud passed over the moon, casting a deep shadow on the earth below.

"!" When the shadow lifted, there was no sign of San'nan. Saito hurried forward, looking for any signs that might indicate which direction he could have gone in, but from a glance San'nan appeared to have simply vanished. Before he could take a closer look, a deep, guttural howl bellowed throughout the night.

\_RAAAAAGH!\_

It was definitely the sound of a rasetsu.

â€"â^žâ€"

Amagiri calmly stared down the rogue rasetsu he was fighting on the grounds of a local shrine. It would seem Miyagawa Sumiko's theory had been correct. Though he had been sent to find the rasetsu, it had in fact come to him first. He had already crushed one of its arms, but in its frenzied state, it didn't seem to care. It kept its grip on the sword in its other hand and charged at him like a wild boar, swinging its sword.

\_AAARAAGH!\_

Amagiri quickly clapped his hands on the sides of the sword, catching it before it could cut him down. The rasetsu continued to grunt and growl as it kept pushing on the sword. Even though it was only using one hand, both of Amagiri's began to tremble as he had to apply more pressure to keep the sword from slipping.

CRUNCH. \_CLICK.\_

The rasetsu growled as it forced its broken arm to twist back into place and heal, trusting the newly improved hand out to grab Amagiri's throat, squeezing hard. Amagiri didn't flinch.

"Blood! Blood! Give me blood!" It growled with a crazed look in its eyes.

"You are beyond reasoning with." Amagiri observed calmly.

\_SNAP.\_

"!" The rasetsu gasped when Amagiri broke the blade of its sword with his bare hands. It immediately dropped the broken sword and leaped back to a safer distance, drawing its short sword for its next attack. It growled again, and with a toothy grin, raised the short sword high in the air.

\_SLASH.\_

In one swift stroke, Saito, who had silently come up from behind, severed the arm holding the sword.

\_RAAAARAAAGH!\_

The rasetsu cried out in pain and clutched at what was left of its bleeding stump of arm as it fell to its knees. Saito raised his sword again. He was about to deliver the finishing blow, but paused as his eyes widened slightly in shock. The rasetsu's other arm, which was still attached, began turn a dark, ashen color and crumble like sand. Saito watched, stunned, as the effect spread to the rest of its body until even its eyes were affected. A strange, flame-like blue light rose up from the ashes.

"To think I would need your help." Amagiri said, snapping him out of it. "Saito-dono, was it?" Saito looked up at the oni as he stepped into the light. Saito had known he wasn't alone, but from his perspective, it had been harder to see the other person's face. He had simply seen the rasetsu attacking and promptly intervened. "You have my apology." Amagiri said, bowing politely to him.

"Amagiri Kyuju?" Saito said, hiding his surprise well. "Who was that rasetsu?" He asked, sheathing his sword. It hadn't been one of theirs.

"He was a Tosa Domain rasetsu of Yukimura Koudou's making. There were rumors that a rasetsu who had escaped the Tosa manor a month ago was committing acts of murder in Edo. I was confirming the validity of that rumor." Amagiri explained as he reached down and scooped up a handful of ash to examine it more closely. Indeed, it was just the same as the remains of Tanaka Souta. The strange occurrence Miyagawa Sumiko witnessed had not been a fluke. "The domain had ordered me to eliminate him on sight, but he had already burned through his lifespan." He allowed the ash in his hand to fall back into the pile of the rasetsus remains and placed his hands together in a quick prayer for the departed.

"His lifespan? Saito asked as the oni stood up again.

"A rasetsu's power is by no means a gift from the gods." Amagiri said. "Extraordinary strength, agility, and miraculous healing abilities— Such powers are hidden within your own body. You are merely using it spread out over the course of several years." He explained. Miyagawa Sumiko had used more scientific terms and had said it had something to do with an irregularity in their 'epiphenomenon' (something to do with the relationship between one's lifespan and number of heartbeats), but he thought this summarization should suffice, seeing as it was basically what hers had boiled down to in the end. She suspected whatever Koudou had done to fix their problem with the sun was to blame for his new rasetsus' more rapid deterioration, since she had never heard of this happening to anyone in the Shinsengumi yet. However, she seemed to have a hard time explaining the rapid disintegration and heatless flames that briefly manifested over the remains, which she suspected was vapors of phosphorus leaving the body. He personally believed it to be their departing souls.

"!" Saito gasped in realization. "Meaning, the more power they wield, the shorter their lifespans become?" He asked.

"Exactly." Amagiri replied.

"So, that rasetsu turned to dust because he ran out of life force?"

"Mn." Amagiri nodded. "That was more or less the theory Miyagawa Sumiko devised after witnessing the same phenomena we just saw."

"Sumiko-san, huh?" Saito said thoughtfully, narrowing his eyes slightly as he stared down at the ashes and the wind began to pick up. "Is she well?"

"She is, though she is worried about the rest of you." Amagiri replied truthfully. "Well, I shall be going now." He bowed and turned to leave. "Share that information with your friends who have become rasetsus. It would seem that some from the Shinsengumi are also wandering in search of blood."

Neither of them were aware that San'nan was watching from the shadows.

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**\*\*April, 1868\*\***

"You've been working too hard." Kazama commented with a frown when he found Sumiko asleep at her desk. Ever since learning just how fast a rasetsu's powers could consume the user's lifespan, she had been working nonstop trying to find a cure. He was willing to give her some alone time to work, but it had been days since he last saw her. He reached out and gently brushed her soft hair out of her face. He furrowed his brow. He didn't like that she was overworking herself for the sake of that man.

"Mn?" Sumiko began to stir. She picked her head up off the desk and started rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Kazama?" She asked sleepily.

"Who else were you expecting? You've been locked in here for days. It's time to come out." He told her.

"Yeah? I guess you're right. I'm getting nowhere. At this rate, I'll just make myself sick, and then I won't be of use to anyone." She admitted reluctantly, pausing for a moment. She blinked "Days? I guess I lost track of time? what's the date?" She asked, glancing up at him.

"It's already the third day of April." He replied with an internal sigh. He was surprised when his eyes suddenly widened and she looked up at him like she had just been slapped in the face.

"What?" Sumiko asked, stunned, as the ground seemed to drop out from under her. "No! No, it can't be, not yet!" She cried, jumping to her feet. She ran for the door, but Kazama blocked her.

"What are you doing? Where do you think you're going?" He asked, frowning, as he stared down at her, startled by the sudden change that had come over her. It felt like if he let her out of his sight now, she might disappear forever.

"I have to go!" She said urgently. "Kondo-sanâ€¦ Kondo-san's been captured!"

"Calm down." He said firmly, placing his hands on her shoulders. "What were you planning to do on your own? Assuming you know of this because of the knowledge you have in the future, then you should already know what is going to happen to him."

"Yes." She said lowly, furrowing her brow. "If I don't goâ€¦ Kondo-san will die. He'll be executed soon. That's what's supposed to happen, according to history, and I've been trying not to interfere too much, butâ€¦ but now that it's happening, I can't just sit back and watch! If I let it happen when I could've maybe done something, then isn't that the same as killing him myself!\_?" She said anxiously, looking extremely torn.

"Are you going to change history for those humans?" Kazama asked. "The fact that you haven't tried to do so until now suggests the future you come from is not a bad one. Weren't you trying to protect it?"

"!" Sumiko said, startled by how close to home his question had hit. She bowed her head and clenched her fists. "You're right. It's not a bad futureâ€¦ in fact, it's a pretty good one, all things considered." It could have been a lot worse when you look at the bigger picture and the different possible outcomesâ€¦ "What's happening nowâ€¦ what's \_supposed\_ to happenâ€¦ may be best for the country as a wholeâ€¦ But I can't just abandon them! I don't know what else could change if I do this, or if I'll even be able to change anything at all. Maybe it's fated to happen this way, but even soâ€¦ I don't want to give up without ever having tried." She said determinedly, raising her head to meet his gaze. "I'm going to protect what's important to me. So what if the government collapses or the country is ruined? If all of that can be destroyed so easily by one girl, then maybe it should collapse. I'm busy just protecting what's right in front of me. I don't know what'll happen to me or the future, but if something has fallen at my feet, then the least I can do is pick it up! In this mixed up world, deciding what's right and wrong isn't easy. You can't just go by somebody else's rules. If you let yourself be controlled like that, you'll become a puppet that can't make any decisions on its own. You have to live by your own rules." Kazama stared at her for a moment in awe. He was impressed with her determination and spirit, but she seemed to be forgetting something else very important. And that pissed him off.

"Hmph. You think I'll just let you leave?" He asked, tightening his grip on her. "You still haven't given me an answer to my proposal. Even if you leave now to help him, you can't save the commander of the Shinsengumi. What can you do for him that his men can't? If they already have him, there's nothing you can do. If you try to break him out on your own, you will only get yourself killed. You have no political power to bargain with, and I have no intention of incurring more debt with Satsuma just to save a human. If you want to blame someone for his death, blame me. I'm used to being the villain. You can hate me if you want, but I won't let you go off and get yourself killed." He thought she would get angry or try to struggle after hearing that, but her expression melted as she stared up at him.

"You're a good man, Kazama Chikage." Sumiko said somberly, surprising him. "You're right, I probably won't be able to save Kondo-san. His death will be too public but the others still have a chance. Please, let me help them." Kazama stared at her for a moment before closing his eyes.

"No matter what I say, you intend to go." He said with a sigh. "Why even bother asking?"

"Because I'd prefer to go with your blessing." She replied with a wan smile, blushing slightly as she continued. "I want to marry you." She said, looking away shyly. Kazama's eyes widened. "When this war is over, let's get married. By then I'll be done taking care of this, and you'll have finished repaying your clan's debt to Satsuma. Don't worry." She said, smiling reassuringly at him when she noticed the concerned look in his eyes. "I won't do stupid things like becoming a human shield anymore. I'll be more careful this time."

"Very well. I suppose I'll have to let you go, for now." Kazama said with a small smile. He pulled her into a deep and possessive, but gentle kiss. "That kiss is proof that you and I are not unconnected." He told her, caressing Sumiko's pink face as she breathed deeply once he pulled away. "Once you've finished sorting yourself out, come back to me. No, if you don't come, I will come and pick you up myself."

## 55. Fleeting Dream

Author's note: Hi, everybody! I'm so sorry for the wait, but I gave up fanfiction for lent. But that's over now, so the story is back!

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Previously:<strong>

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## ><p><strong>Chapter 55: Fleeting Dream<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"You let her go? Just like that?" Shiranui asked, stunned, after hearing Kazama's explanation for the noticeable lack of Sumiko later that evening. "Wow. I definitely did <em>not<em> see that comingâ€|"

"Yes. I misjudged Miyagawa Sumiko." Amagiri said. "You were wise to cut ties with her when you did." He told Kazama.

"Whoa, \_wait\_." Shiranui said as he and Kazama glanced at Amagiri with confused and disapproving looks on their faces. "Were we listening to the same story, because I could have sworn she and Kazama just got engagedâ€|?"

"What are you trying to say, Amagiri?" Kazama asked lowly, narrowing his eyes dangerously at the red-haired oni.

"She has become too involved with human affairs." Amagiri replied calmly.

"Hmph. Isn't it a bit late for that?" Kazama asked sardonically. "She was raised by humans, remember? She has been involved with them since birth. She has her own code of honor."

"I thought she had begun to appreciate our ways, but I was wrong. She has strayed from the path of the Oni. We must have nothing more to do with her." Amagiri stated sternly. He didn't like Kazama's tone when speaking of Miyagawa Sumiko. He should be shunning her, not defending her.

"Amagiri, \_you\_â€|" Kazama began to growl angrily as his hand twitched on the hilt of his sword.

"â€|Speaking of cutting tiesâ€|" Shiranui bravely interrupted before things could escalate. "I think it's about time we pull out of this war. Forget Satcho, I heard they're planning on making their own rasetsu unit."

"What?" Amagiri said, taken aback, as he and Kazama whipped their heads around to stare at him.

"It's true." Shiranui insisted with a disappointed sigh as he crossed his arm. "They're following Tosa's example and have even made a payment to Koudou for his services."

"Hmph." Kazama furrowed his brow and frowned. This is why humans wereâ€|

"How foolish." Amagiri said, closing his eyes.

"Yeah, tell me about it." Shiranui agreed. "I know you all have a debt to repay, so you can do what you want, but as for me, I'm tired of this bullshit. I'm done."

"As am I." Kazama agreed. "Whatever debt we may owe the Satsuma clan, we have no obligation to assist them any further if they insist on creating more of those fakes."



â€"â^žâ€"

**\*\*April 11, 1868\*\***

Edo Castle surrendered without a fight. That indicated that the Imperial Army had obtained supremacy in the Boshin War. Just outside the Tosa manor in Edo, Harada Sanosuke was keeping a careful watch from the shadows, observing their every moveâ€|

"I hope you're not planning on storming the fortress by yourself." A familiar voice said quietly from behind.

Harada's eyes widened as he spun around to face its owner.

"Yo!" Sumiko greeted him with a smile.

"Sumiko\_!\_?" Harada whisper-yelled, pleasantly surprised. "What are you doing here? How did you get away?"

"Surprisingly enough, they let me go." She replied frankly.  
"Iâ€"

"!" Harada raised his spear as she felt the presence of another oni appear behind her.

"So, this is where you went." Shiranui commented as Sumiko turned to face him too. "Who knew you'd still be in Edo." He said, glancing at Harada. "Didn't you skedaddle with the others?"

"I have my own work to attend to." Sano replied, furrowing his brow slightly.

"I didn't expect to see you again so soon, Shiranui-san. Has Kazama changed his mind about letting me go?" Sumiko asked, frowning slightly.

"Hm? Well, Amagiri's been giving him a hard time about it, but I'm not here for that." Shiranui said frankly. "So you can relax." He told Harada.

Sumiko nodded to let him know it was okay, and Harada lowered his spear.

"Is that so? Oh yeah, I appreciated the help back in Koufu." He told Shiranui, remembering he had been wanting to thank him for that.

"Heh. I just didn't like that old foggy." Shiranui said dismissively.

"What's happened since then?" Harada asked.

"For some odd reason, the Imperial Army paid the remainder of our balance due to that old fart Koudou!" Shiranui said, furrowing his brow.

"What the hell?" Sumiko and Harada asked in unison, also furrowing their brows.

They must be good friends if they could still do that after being apart for so long.

"I've cut my ties with them." Shiranui continued. "I don't owe them shit. But I did hear somethin' interesting. Koudou is planning to team up with the radicals and start another war soon."

"!" Sumiko gasped in alarm.

"Another war?" Harada asked.

"It's because of his rasetsus." She said, frowning. "He needs lots of blood to keep them alive."

"Bingo!" Shiranui said. "So he's got his sights set on Edo."

"No way! You're saying he's gonna start a war just to steal blood for his rasetsus\_!\_?" Harada demanded, shocked.

"It's so he can create an army that never dies." Shiranui explained. "We've got gobs of enemies in other countries, too."

"So, in order to protect this country from outside forces, he's going to terrorize it from within? Sensei's gone off the deep end." Sumiko said grimly, clenching her fists.

"What\_!\_?" Harada slammed his fist against the wall, shaking with anger. "He's going to involve people who have nothing to do with this?"

"We can't let that happen!" Sumiko said urgently. It would definitely change the whole future for the worse if the rasetsu were allowed to take over!

"I'm not interested in whatever history you humans carve." Shiranui stated bluntly. "But I won't sit back and let that geezer do as he pleases."

"What about Kazama and Amagiri-san?" Sumiko asked.

"Naturally, they aren't too thrilled about these plans either, but they still haven't concluded their business with Satsuma yet." Shiranui replied.

"Shiranui, are you going to stop Koudou-san by yourself?" Harada asked, taken aback. "Why would an oni go through such lengths for us?"

Shiranui uncrossed his arms and looked up at the sky.

" 'Even should my life expire in the fields of Musashi, my Japanese spirit will still here remain.' " He quoted.

"What's that from?" Sumiko asked.

"It's something a certain guy used to say a whole bunch." Shiranui replied as he turned to leave. "Although I think embracing a 'Japanese spirit' is just a convenient fantasy you humans came up with."

"I will pay you back in full for your help Koufu." Harada promised solemnly as he and Sumiko watched the purple-haired oni disappear.

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The Seihei Corps, where Nagakura Shinpachi served as Vice Commander, met with the former Bakufu Army at the Kanuma Inn.

Shimada was drawing some water from the well, when a familiar voice called out to him.

"Yo, long time no see!" Shinpachi greeted him cheerfully.

"Nagakura-san!" Shimada gasped in surprise.

"Heheh." Shinpachi grinned at the look on his face.

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"They got Kondo-san!\_?" Shinpachi exclaimed when he heard the news.

"Hai." Shimada said regretfully.

"Is that~| so?" Shinpachi said, holding a hand to his forehead. "Hijikata-san is stuck bearing a heavy burden."

"How is Harada-san fairing?" Shimada asked.

"He had some important business, so he went back to Edo." Shinpachi said, lowering his hand again.

"And here I thought I would get to see him again. What a pity." Shimada remarked with disappointment.

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**\*\*April 19, 1868\*\***

The former Bakufu Army laid siege on Utsunomyia Castle, which had allied itself with the Imperial Army. With over twice their forces, the former Bakufu Army crushed Utsunomyia's army. But then they used the castle as a shield, creating a standstill.

"We'll never get anywhere at this rate." Hijikata said grimly, furrowing his brow, as bullets whizzed past him. He and his men had taken cover in a bamboo grove near the castle gates. "It's about time we charged the enemy lines."

"Ch-Charge them!\_?" One of the men asked incredulously as the others paled and balked at the idea. "You want to charge through all those bullets?"

"Listen, those guns are old and have poor accuracy." Hijikata said. "It's not like you'll plop over dead if you take a hit or two."

"Y-You're nuts!"

"Didn't you come to fight a war?" Hijikata asked sternly, fixing him with a piercing glare. "You should be prepared to lay down your life." He turned back to face the front line again and raised his voice to address the rest of the troop. "When I give the signal, follow that guy and charge!" He ordered, referring to the man in front of him.

"I don't want to!" The man shouted with fear, shooting to his feet. "I don't want to die in a place like this!" He tried to run away, but Hijikata stood up and drew his sword, aiming it at the man's throat to stop him.

"Fleeing before the enemy is in violation of the Code and punishable by death!" Hijikata reminded him fiercely before lowering his sword and pointing it at the castle. "If you're going to die anyway, do what you can first! Follow me!" He roared, letting out a mighty war cry as he charged through the hail of bullets without hesitation, cutting down any enemy soldier stupid enough to come after him.

"He's incredible! I've never seen anyone like him before!" One of the men said, astounded as they watched him take on multiple enemies at once. "So that is Hijikata Toshizo of the Shinsengumi." He furrowed his brow and raised his gun. "Follow him! Follow Hijikata-san!" He rallied the others, letting out a war cry of his own as they all charged forth to join their commander, and together they stormed the castle.

Hijikata carefully made his way through the building. Dead bodies lined the halls. Slowly, he slide the door of one of the inner rooms open just enough to peek inside. What he saw shocked him.

"!" Hijikata gasped and quickly pushed the door open the rest of the way to face the two oni in the room.

"Hmph. You again, Hijikata Toshizo?" Kazama asked.

"Satsuma asked us to deliver a classified document. I never expected us to get drawn into battle." Amagiri said, answering Hijikata's unasked question.

"It would seem the time to pay you back for humiliating me has finally come." Kazama remarked, narrowing his eyes slightly at the rasetzu. Even if he had let Sumiko go so she could try to save her friends in the Shinsengumi, he had his own promise to uphold. He and Hijikata still had a score to settle.

"You came all the way out here?" Hijikata asked sardonically, furrowing his brow. "You oni must have a lot of time on your hands. Where's Sumiko? What have you done with her?"

"Hnh. She's none of your concern." Kazama said as he drew his sword. Hijikata narrowed his eyes slightly.

There was something different about Kazama's sword. It almost looked like it was glowing!

"I told you not to grow emotionally involved with this human!" Amagiri told Kazama sternly.

"Shut your mouth, or I'll kill you too." Kazama said, narrowing his eyes dangerously.

"Would you persist even at the cost of losing your respect as an oni, losing the support of our clan and becoming a rogue oni?" Amagiri continued. Kazama had always had an unfortunate interest in what humans referred to as 'warrior spirit', but he had never acted on it until now. "Is this because of that headstrong woman? Are you trying to follow in her footsteps? Perhaps I should have done away withâ€" "

\_SWISH.\_

Before he could finish that sentence Kazama spun around and turned his sword on Amagiri, glaring fiercely at the older oni with the promise of a painful death if she should so much as touch a single hair on Sumiko's head. Amagiri closed his eyes and bowed his head in disappointment as he took a step back. Nothing was going to change Kazama's mind. He was a lost cause.

Satisfied with Amagiri's decision to back off, Kazama turned to face Hijikata again. Hijikata raised his sword, taking up an offensive stance as he activated his rasetsu powers.

"Hyaaaaa!" Hijikata roared as he charged at the oni with white hair and red eyes. "!" Even though he was still in his 'human' form, Kazama was able to block his attack with only one hand on his sword. He was much stronger than before. Hijikata jumped back to put some distance between them, but Kazama wasn't having it.

"I won't let you escape!" The oni shouted as he lunged forth and swung his sword at the rasetsu in a series of fierce attacks. It was all Hijikata could do to block them. "We still have plenty of time until sunset." Kazama taunted him. "Is it a painful time for you to be moving about?" He applied more pressure behind his sword and slashed Hijikata across the chest.

"Heh!" Hijikata laughed bitterly as he crouched down with a hand pressed against his bleeding chest. "This wound willâ€"! He gasped in alarm when he realized the bleeding wasn't stopping. "What's going on?"

"Confused as to why your wound hasn't healed, Fake Oni?" Kazama asked with a smirk as he looked down on him. "This is called Yasutsuna's DÃ¿jigiri. Minamoto no Yorimitsu is said to have killed Shutendoji with this oni-slaying katana."

"You brought quite the weapon for killing a mere 'fake'." Hijikata remarked sardonically as he got back on his feet and raised his sword again. "All that means is that I can't let you stab me!"

"Fool!" Kazama said, striking Hijikata's sword with a enough force to send him sliding back a couple of inches.

!" Hijikata grunted in pain as he charged forth, swinging his sword, but Kazama dodged each and every blow effortlessly. Hijikata gasped when the oni suddenly disappeared only to reappear right behind him. He spun around to face his opponent, but before he could block Kazama's attack, the oni's sword was already slicing into his

shoulder. "Hng!" Hijikata winced as he raised his sword to block the next attack, gritting his teeth as he strained to hold the oni off while his white hair faded back to black.

"Have you just about reached your limit?" Kazama asked tauntingly, a little disappointed to have their fight end so soon. "You've reverted back to human form. You're more fragile and pathetic than a meager insect! I will lay waste to you along with the name of the accursed Shinsengumi!"

"You'll destroy the Shinsengumi?" Hijikata asked. Kazama's smirk fell slightly when he saw that look of fierce determination that was still in Hijikata's eyes as he continued to struggle against him. He wasn't defeated yet. "The Shinsengumi were a burden far, far too heavy for me to bear on my ownâ€¦ but the thought of someone like you destroying it pisses me off!" He shouted as he forced himself back onto his feet and off of his knees, strengthened by his anger. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Kazama's face as he had to place a second hand on the hilt of his sword when Hijikata began to push it back. Even more formidable than Hijikata's power as a rasetsu was his indomitable human will, his drive to keep fighting in the face of adversityâ€¦ the same strength Sumiko possessed.

"They set the place on fire!" A voice shouted from somewhere outside the room as the flames suddenly began to spread across the floor they were standing on, surrounding them.

\_CREEAK!\_

"!" Hijikata gasped when the ceiling about them began to crack, and he and Kazama both had to break their deadlock to jump back as burning debris fell between them from the floor above. The two men glared fiercely at each other through the wall of flames that was now separating them.

"Damn it!" Kazama cursed as he sheathed his sword and disappeared into the smoke filling the room. Hijikata sheathed his own sword and fell to his knees, panting, as he clutched at his open wound, trying to stop the bleeding.

"The more power a rasetsu wields, the more his life force is chiseled away." Amagiri cautioned him.

"That is a fair price to pay to protect what I hold dear." Hijikata retorted as he straightened up. Amagiri closed his eyes.

"We oni intend to cease aiding the anti-Bakufu forces." He informed Hijikata. "In the near future, the Shogunate will crumble. Are you going to stay aboard a sinking ship?"

"I don't want to protect the Shogun or the Bakufu." Hijikata said as staggered to his feet. "I want to protect the Shinsengumi, which I built up with Kondo-san!" He stated determinedly.

"â€¦ I shall leave Kazama to you." Amagiri said after a moment. "He is no longer of our concern. Now, if you will excuse me." With that, he too turned and disappeared into the smoke. The moment he was gone, Hijikata collapsed onto the floor.

"Hijikata-san, where are you!\_?" Shinpachi shouted anxiously as he

and Shimada ran over to look for him the burning room.  
"Hijikata-san!"

"Ah!" Both men gasped when they spotted their commander lying on the floor amid the flames.

"Hijikata-san!" Shinpachi shouted.

"Vice-Commander!" Shimada cried.

Hijikata fought desperately in the siege on Utsunomyia Castle, but four days later, the Imperial Army effortlessly reclaimed it. The former Bakufu Army resumed its march to Aizu, but having sustained injuries, Hijikata-san stayed in Nikko, where he received medical treatment.

## 56. The Last Battle of Harada Sanosuke

I own nothing but my OC.

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><p><strong>Chapter 56: The Last Battle of Harada Sanosuke<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>May 15, 1868<strong>

In response to how the Shogi Company barricaded themselves in the Kan'ei Temple in Ueno, the Imperial Army launched an attack, which led to a fierce battle.

SPLASH!

Sumiko and Sano ignored the water that splashed up as they ran through a puddle, rushing through the rain towards the battlefield.

Â«Â« Flashback Â«Â«

Sumiko had been sticking close to Sano-san, because according to history he was the next in line to die, and since he was all alone, she figured he could use some backup. They were taking shelter from the rain when they happened to overhear an important conversation.

"I heard the Imperial Army has finally launched an attack against that Shogi company holed up in the Kan'ei Temple." Said one of the men standing close to them to a friend.

"!" Harada and Sumiko exchanged a glance and nodded. This was it. If there was a battle, it would be their best chance to find Koudou.

Â«Â« End Flashback Â«Â«

Sumiko frowned slightly as she glanced at Sano out the corner of her eye. She knew they had to come to Ueno, but she was worried. This was where Harada Sanosuke was supposed to die. She shook her head and

furrowed her brow with grim determination as she tightened her grip on the straps of the tansu on her back that contained the medical equipment she had retrieved from Koudou-san's clinic. She wasn't going to let that happen!

A chill went up Sumiko's spine as she and Sano halted abruptly. They furrowed their brows as they stared into the fog, waiting for the approaching enemy they had sensed. A whole line of glowing red eyes pierced the dense vapor. The rasetsus were coming.

"Looks like our hunch was right." Sano remarked grimly.

"Yeah." Sumiko agreed, frowning, as she quickly removed her tansu and hid it in some nearby bushes, where she thought it would be safe. She knew she would need it, but she couldn't fight as well while trying to lug it around. And shit was about to get real.

"I'm impressed you knew to come here." Shiranui commented as he appeared behind them, smirking. He had a bulging bag slung over his shoulder.

"Hmph. Weren't you the one who told us that Koudou-san had hooked up with Imperial Army radicals so he could get blood for his rasetsus, Shiranui?" Sano reminded the oni, slightly chagrined.

"Did I say that?" Shiranui asked innocently, causing Sumiko to sweat-drop.

"Yes." She deadpanned. "Which means they'll gather in search of blood after there's been a big battle."

"And since they stand out like sore thumbs, they can only move at night." Sano added with a smirk.

"You're pretty smart for a lug swingin' around that antique weapon." Shiranui complimented him. "But that ain't gonna do you a lick of good even if you thrust it into their hearts." He said, dropping his bag on the ground.

"Why not?" Sumiko asked as he squatted down beside it. "That's worked for us pretty well so far." Her eyes widened slightly when Shiranui opened the bag to reveal hundreds of bullets. That was some serious heat he was packing.

"Silver bullets?" Sano asked. Shiranui grinned deviously as he grabbed a fistful of the special bullets, letting some of them fall back into the bag.

"You've gotta come packin' some of these if you wanna exterminate those monsters." He said by way of explanation, loading his gun as the rasetsus drew closer. "I couldn't find hide nor hair of that geezer after what happened in Koufu, and now he finally shows himself."

"Yeah. And just look at all the rasetsus he's created!" Sano said grimly. Sumiko furrowed her brow. The fog was beginning to clear. It looked like there were over a hundred of them.

"Wouldn't it be for your own good if you scurried home, weak human?" Shiranui teased Sano, glancing curiously at Sumiko. He wondered why



she had let him come to such a dangerous fight when she had left Kazama because she wanted to save him and the othersâ€¦ Was it out of respect for his pride? She was going to really have her hands full if her plan was to fight Koudou and his rasetsus while trying to protect Harada at the same timeâ€¦

"I'm afraid I have absolutely no intention of doing that." Sano replied with a slight smirk. Sumiko let out a small sigh and smiled wryly. She knew that would be his response if someone tried to stop him. Once the men of the Shinsengumi made up their minds, there was no stopping them.

"Heh." Shiranui smirked. He knew there was a reason he liked this guy.

"Well, since that's settledâ€¦" Sumiko said, drawing her sword from its sheath. "How about we get this party started?"

\_BANG!\_

"!" Koudou started when one of his rasetsu was suddenly shot down. He looked ahead through the remaining fog and saw the three of them waiting for him.

"Yo, Koudou!" Shiranui greeted him. Koudou grit his teeth and took a step back.

"Why have you come here?" He demanded.

"I'm here 'cause I don't dig the way you made these fakes and call 'em the new oni." Shiranui replied frankly as he raised his gun. "I was thinkin' this was a great opportunity to teach you the ways of the Oni!"

"Hmph. Even if you lecture me about the 'ways of the Oni', such things will come to an end once I destroy your kind." Koudou retorted cynically. "I had to do whatever it took to become strong!"

"What?" Shiranui asked, cocking his gun.

"Are you going to wipe out the oni as well as the humans now, Sensei?" Sumiko asked, taking a step forward.

"Sumikoâ€¦" Koudou said, frowning as the crease on his brow deepened. "You should leave, while you still can."

"I can't do that, Sensei. I said I'd stop you if you kept this up." She reminded him. "And I meant it. I don't want to hurt you, but I can't let you do this." She said with grim determination. "Please, stop making rasetsusâ€¦give up on this crazy plan for revenge! You're only making things worse!"

"Why can't you understand? I'm doing this for our clan! For you and Chizuru!" Koudou shouted at her in frustration.

"She already said she doesn't want it. Do you seriously think you're doing this for the Yukimura clan?" Sano asked, furrowing his brow. "For Chizuru!\_? Do you realize just how much suffering you've caused Chizuru!\_?" He demanded angrily.

"â€¦ There is no point in further conversation." Koudou said evenly, refusing to budge. He couldn't stop. He couldn't turn back now, not when he had already come so far. He was on the verge of turning his dream into a reality! "Rasetsus, help yourselves to their blood!"

"RAAAAAH!" The rasetsus growled excitedly.

"Senseiâ€¦" Sumiko said sadly, tightening her grip on her sword.

"Let's do this, Sumiko, Harada!" Shiranui yelled as he charged forth.

"Yeah!" Harada agreed, quickly following after him, with Sumiko on his heels.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Shiranui fired several rounds, taking out the first row of rasetsus before veering off to the side to make way for Harada and Sumiko while he reloaded.

"Oryaaah!" Sano roared as he impaled the first rasetsu that came at him through the heart.

"Hah!" Sumiko grunted as she swung her sword, decapitating another. She didn't like killing, but in this case, it had to be done. It was time to do or die.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

\_SLASH!\_

STAB!

One after another, the three of them fought together and slew whatever came at them. Soon, despite their overwhelming disadvantage in numbers, they had managed to take out more than half of Koudou's forces.

"Heh!" Shiranui said with a side glance at the other two, admiring their skill. Not bad for a human and a half-oni.

"Henh!" Sano said. Shiranui wasn't too shabby himself.

Sumiko just smiled wryly and shook her head. Boys.

"Eryaah!" Sano yelled as he took down three more before falling to his knees. "Nng!" He winced as blood began to pool around him on the ground.

"!" Sumiko gasped in alarm when she looked over and saw the gaping wound in his side. "Sano-san!" She cried anxiously, cutting through the wall of rasetsus between them as she rushed over to him. She wanted to stop the bleeding, but there was no time. The remaining rasetsu began swarming toward them, drawn to the scent of Harada's blood. "Yah!" Sumiko shouted as she fought furiously to keep them at bay.

Shiranui noticed their plight and quickly took out his last two opponents, but by the time he finished turning to help them, Sumiko was already decapitating the last one. Shiranui let out a whistle of appreciation as she paused for a moment to catch her breath before running to retrieve her tansu so she could treat Harada's wound before he lost too much blood.

"This is absurd!" Koudou said as he stared at the scene before him, stunned. "They annihilated my rasetsus?" How could all of them have been slaughtered so easily! It hadn't been a fight, but a massacre! Since when could Sumiko fight like that?

"I'll send you after them, Koudou." Shiranui said, aiming his gun at the older oni. "Prepare yourself!"

"Wait!" Sumiko yelled as he pulled the trigger. She didn't want to kill him!

\_CLICK.\_

"Shit! I'm out of bullets." Shiranui cursed as he lowered his gun and opened it to reload.

"Hahaha!" Koudou laughed boldly, elated after managing to escape death. "It would seem you're petering out!" He shouted as he pulled a bomb from his kimono sleeve and raised it high in the air.

!" Shiranui's eyes widened in shock as he realized how screwed he was. The bomb was already lit"there wasn't enough time to reload and take aim!

"This will finish you off!" Koudou declared vindictively as he prepared to throw the explosive at him.

"Che!"

"Sensei, don't!" Sumiko cried as something flew past her head. "Eh?" She said numbly as her pupils constricted when she recognized what it was.

"Ah!" Koudou cried out in pain as Harada's spear pierced him in the shoulder, forcing him to drop the bomb. !" He gasped as his eyes followed the falling object.

\_BOOM!\_!

The bomb exploded into a blinding blaze, throwing Koudou into the water.

"Harada!" Shiranui exclaimed as he spun around to face them and saw that while Sumiko was still on her knees, Harada had stood up to launch his spear at Koudou in order to save him. Sumiko immediately snapped out her daze.

That's right, Sano-san was still in trouble!

"Nng!" Harada grunted in pain as he fell to his knees again, holding his injured side. His breathing was heavily labored.

"Sano-san!" Sumiko said anxiously, quickly digging through her tansu

for the blood clotting powder. "Idiot! Don't move anymore!" you'll make it worse!" She scolded him as she furrowed her brow with worry, hoping desperately that this wouldn't be the wound that killed him.

Seeing that Sumiko was already looking after Harada, Shiranui turned his attention back to Koudou. He finished loading his gun and approached the edge of the water. He could see bubbles coming up from below the surface, indicating Koudou was still breathing. And then they stopped.

Koudou was dead.

Shiranui holstered his gun and walked over to join the others.

"I've repaid you for Koufu." Harada told him, wincing from the effort it took to speak.

"You're mighty smug for a mere human." Shiranui said with a wry smirk.

"Shut up! I told you not to make any unnecessary movements!" Sumiko snapped sternly as she finished laying out the tarp she had been pulling out of her tansu. "Shiranui-san, Please help me lift Sano-san onto the tarp. I have to operate here. If I wait any longer, he'll die." She said, dead serious. Shiranui was taken aback by this sudden request, but he quickly recovered.

"All right." He agreed, moving to help her shift the mortally wounded human. It would be boring if an opponent as interesting as Harada died.

"O-Oi!" Harada said, wincing as they moved him from the dirt onto the clean tarp.

"Hush!" Sumiko shushed him again. "I'm sorry, Sano-san, but you're losing blood too fast. There's no time for anesthesia or a painkiller. Just try to hold still and bite down on this." She instructed him urgently, placing a leather strap between his teeth. She quickly pulled out a bottle of alcohol and began disinfecting her hands and tools, pouring some on the wound to clean it.

"Nnng!" Harada grunted as he bit down on the leather strap. Salt would've hurt less!

"Hold him down, Shiranui-san! I can't have him moving while I operate!"

All Harada could remember before he blacked out was the worst pain he had ever experienced in his entire life.

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When he came to his senses again, Harada found himself staring up at very nice ceiling and tucked into a quality futon. He tried to sit up but couldn't. Not only because of the immense pain that shot through his side when he tried, but because there was a weight on top of him. He was able to lift his head slightly and saw that the cause was Sumiko. She had fallen asleep beside his futon with her head and shoulders on top of him.

"She exhausted herself taking care of you." Shiranui said, alerting the human to his presence as he walked over to join them. It was a good thing Kazama wasn't there to see this, or he'd have put Harada to sleep permanently.

"How long have I been out?" Harada asked, feeling weak.

"Two days." Shiranui replied. "We're in some hatamoto's residence. After she finished performing surgery on you, she made me lug your sorry ass all the way here. Looks like you owe me again." He said with a smirk.

"Great." Harada remarked sarcastically with a tired sigh.

"You're lucky to be alive, you know." Shiranui said a bit more seriously. "You'd be dead if not for her. She did some crazy stuff, the likes of which I've never seen before, but it worked. It's a freakin' miracle, if you ask me."

"Yeah." Harada said with a wry smile. "That sounds like Sumiko-sanâ€¦ our miracle worker." It was good to have her back.

"You know, looking at you reminds me of a dude called Takasugi." Shiranui remarked as he looked up and glanced out of the open doors into the courtyard. "Maybe I should pay a visit to his grave sometime. What about you? What do you plan on doing now?"

"Well, Shinpachi is waiting for meâ€¦ so I need to hurry to Aizu." Harada said thoughtfully as he stared up at the ceiling.

"I'm afraid that's out of the question." Sumiko said solemnly as she slowly sat up and started rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Apparently their conversation had woken her up.

"I meant after I healed." Harada told her with a wry smile. He knew she was strict with her recovering patients.

"I'm sorry, Sano-san, but even after thatâ€¦ I still can't let you go." She said apologetically.

"What? Why!?" Harada asked, furrowing his brow in confusion.

"Because Harada Sanosuke is supposed to die today." She stated calmly. Harada's eyes widened in shock.

"What are youâ€¦?" He began.

"She's from the future, man." Shiranui said, earning himself a surprised look from Sumiko. "I happened to overhear one of your conversations with Kazama." He told her matter-of-factly. Sumiko sweat-dropped.

He means he eavesdropped, right?

"She knows things before they happen." Shiranui continued to explain to Harada, who was staring at him like he had lost his mind. "Tell him, Sumiko."

"It's true." Sumiko finally admitted, closing her eyes. "It's a long story, but I knew all of this was going to happen. It may not seem like it, but I've been walking on egg shells this whole time, trying to be careful not to change anything that could have a negative impact on the timelineâ€¦ but I couldn't take it anymore. I just couldn't sit back and watch while you and the others died. I couldn't save Kondo-san, but Iâ€¦"

Harada raised his hand and gently placed it on her head when he saw the tears beginning to form in her eyes at the thought of their Commander's death.

"You've been carry a heavy burden, haven't you? Sorry for not noticing."

"â€¦ You aren't mad?" She asked. "After all, I knew things would turn out this wayâ€¦"

"You knew, but you stayed with us anyway." He reminded her. "And you came back for us. You saved me."

"Yes, but officially history says you were supposed to die from your wounds in this house." She said, biting her lip. "However, because a friend of mine wrote a report on you, I happened to learn about another, lesser known theory that says you actually survived and left Japan for China, where you became a leader for a group of horse-riding bandits. I remember it because I thought it sounded kind of ridiculous at the time, but now I'm banking on it being true." She finished with a smile.

"A group of horse-riding bandits, huh? Sounds interesting." Shiranui commented with a smirk.

"But I can't just leave Shinpachi." Harada said, furrowing his brow.

"I know, it's hard. But you have to." Sumiko said sympathetically, knowing how close they were. "In the timeline where you 'die' Shinpachi-san survives. I said it before, didn't I? That muscle-head is too dumb to die. He'll survive the war, get married, and die from natural causes as an old grandpa!"

"Heh! Shinpachi, married?" Harada asked dubiously, looking thoroughly amused by the concept.

"I know, right? I feel for his wifeâ€¦" Sumiko commented dryly. "So you don't have to worry about Shinpachi-san and the others. You do what you need to and leave them to me."

Later that evening, in order for the rest of the world to think he was dead, they faked Harada's death and, with help from Shiranui, Sumiko carried him off under the cover of darkness to bring him somewhere else to finish his recovery. When he was well enough to travel, Harada boarded a ship to China. After taking some time to visit Takasugi Shinsaku's grave, Shiranui also boarded the same ship. She never saw either of them again.

Decades later, there were reports that an old Japanese man came to the aid of the Imperial Army in the First Sino-Japanese war. He claimed to be Harada Sanosuke. This was reported in a newspaper in

1965, but remains unsubstantiated.

## 57. Reunion at Sendai

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 57: Reunion at Sendai<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>April 1868<strong>

Sumiko let out a sigh as she sat in the grass on the side of the road and stared up at the vast blue sky above her.

"Right about nowâ€¦ Saito-san should be in Aizuâ€¦" She thought aloud as she leaned back against her tansu, allowing herself to relax for a short break before resuming her long journey. The area she was currently seemed safe enough, and she hadn't run into any highway robbers for quite some time. After seeing off Sano and Shiranui, Sumiko had decided her next destination should be Sendai, in the Miyagi Prefecture. She knew for sure that Shimpachi, Saito, and Shimada were supposed to survive, so that only left her with the demon vice-commander to worry about. His appointment with death was set for the next summer, so at the moment her main concern was being able to meet up with Hijikata and Chizuru before they left for Ezo. Once the Republic of Ezo was set up, it would be difficult for her as an ordinary citizen to gain access to the island without solid proof of her connection to them. Sumiko furrowed her brow slightly as another thought occurred to her.

What about Heisuke and San'nan-san?

Technically, they should have both died already, according to history, but they were still alive and fighting as members of the Rasetsu Unit. She bit her lip and lowered her head. As rasetsus, they probably didn't have much longer to liveâ€¦ several months at the most.

"Damn it!" Sumiko cursed under her breath, clenching her fist around a handful of grass. She knew there was very little she could do for them. Like Okita, they were dying from something that was beyond her ability to heal. She could feel a tear threatening to form in her eye at the thought of the sadistic and cheeky swordsman. Okitaâ€¦ if he wasn't already dead, he soon would be. Since there was no way to save him, she hoped he would at least be able to get a chance to die on his own termsâ€¦

Sumiko quickly wiped her eyes and got back on her feet. She hoisted her tansu up onto her back again. No, she couldn't think about that now. She had to keep moving. There would be plenty of time for tears later; right now she still had a job to do. She needed to find Chizuru and Hijikata.

â€œâˆžâ€œ

\*\*September 1868\*\*

Hijikata and Chizuru arrived in Sendai with his troops. San'nan-san was supposed to have led the Rasetsu Unit to Sendai in advance, but they never received any reports from the Unit and lost contact with them. Hijikata was struggling with this predicament when Enomoto Takeaki, the second in command of the former Bakufu navy, came to pay him a visit shortly after their arrival.

"It's been a long time, Hijikata-kun." Enomoto greeted the former vice-commander of the Shinsengumi.

"I'm glad to see you're still the same, Enomoto-san." Hijikata said. "Stealing eight flagships from the Imperial Armyâ€¦ Your fearless feat astonishes me."

"Well, Hijikata-kun, you have done a commendable job yourself. I am sorry I lacked the power to save Kondo-san. We have lost a great manâ€¦" Enomoto said gravely, bowing his head, as the two men let a moment of silence pass out of respect for the fallen commander.

"Now, tell me." Hijikata spoke at length. "How are things in Sendai?" He hadn't had much time to take stock of the city's situation for himself yet.

"Actually," Enomoto said, raising his head to look Hijikata in the eye. "I haven't been able to speak with the Sendai daimyo. I've dropped by the castle several times, but they never give an 'aye' or 'nay' when I request an audience."

"Pardon me." Chizuru said softly, sliding open the door so she could serve them tea.

"And I've heard an outlandish rumor." Enomoto continued, knowing Chizuru could be trusted. "Supposedly there is a strange unit residing within the Sendai domain."

"A strange unit?" Hijikata asked.

"Murder has been rampant in the castle town. Rumor has it the murderers enter and leave the castle freely." Enomoto explained. A gasp escaped Chizuru's lips as she finished serving them. "The castle is eerily quiet. What could have happened in there?"

"Enomoto-san, could you let me handle these murder cases?" Hijikata asked calmly, keeping his poker face firmly in place. "Please continue with your efforts to see the daimyo."

"Sure." Enomoto agreed, relieved to have someone so reliable looking into it.

After seeing Enomoto off, Hijikata returned to the room, where Chizuru was collecting their empty tea cups.

"Um, about those murdersâ€¦" Chizuru said hesitantly as he took a seat. "Do you thinkâ€¦?"

"I can't say anything while we're still in the speculation stage." Hijikata replied calmly.



"Hai." She said quietly.

"But if San'nan-san is the ringleader behind those murders, I will probably have to kill him." He stated grimly, furrowing his brow.

~~~~~

Hijikata stopped and gazed up at the castle sitting high above the ramparts. It seemed to loom ominously over him and the rest of the town. Although many of the townspeople seemed too wary to speak to him directly of any of the incidents, in the last half of an hour, what he had heard only deepened his suspicions.

"I hope you're not planning to go in alone." A familiar voice stated matter-of-factly from only a couple behind him, causing Hijikata to whirl around to face its owner. His eyes widened in surprise as the young woman with the large tansu on her back tipped her straw hat at him.

"Long time no see, Hijikata-san." Sumiko greeted him with the hint of a smirk playing on her lips, unable to help the flicker of amusement she felt at the astonished expression on his face, despite the heavy circumstances surrounding their meeting.

"You~! You escaped!\_? How did you get away?" Hijikata asked urgently as he placed his hands on her shoulders to make sure she was real, amazed to see her standing there so casually after all this time.

"I'll explain later." Sumiko told him, flashing a brief apologetic smile for making him worry, before adopting a more serious expression. "But, first, I have a very important question that needs to be answered: Where is Chizuru?"

~~~~~

Chizuru was working on the laundry. She had just finished hanging up another kimono to dry on the line when Heisuke came running up.

"Chizuru!" He called out anxiously, skidding to a halt in front of the side gate.

"Heisuke-kun!\_?" Chizuru exclaimed, surprised by his sudden appearance. She was glad to see he was all right, but he was obviously very worried about something. He looked like he had run the whole way there.

"Where's Hijikata-san?" Heisuke asked, panting slightly.

"He's out right now. More importantly, what's kept you?" Chizuru asked as she approached him, concerned. "I was worried sick when we couldn't get ahold of you."

"Sorry. I couldn't really pull away from San'nan-san." Heisuke apologized, bowing his head. "See, San'nan-san may have gone over to the Imperial Army.

"What!\_?"

"He's been holding secret meetings with Koudou-san in Sendai Castle!"

Chizuru's eyes widened.

"T-Tou-sama is in the castle!\_?" She gasped.

"At any rate, I thought I should see what Hijikata-san thinks and slipped out, butâ€¦!" Heisuke continued. "Keh!" He furrowed his brow and clicked his tongue in irritation as he hopped over the gate and positioned himself protectively in front of Chizuru as a small troop of rasetsus wearing Imperial Army uniforms marched up to confront them.

"These are enemy rasetsus. Get outta here, Chizuru!" Heisuke said urgently, drawing his sword.

"No, that will not be necessary." A familiar voice stated calmly.

"!" Heisuke and Chizuru gasped as the rasetsus parted to reveal her father.

"It's good to see you again, Chizuru." Koudou greeted his adopted daughter with a smile.

"Tou-sama!" Chizuru exclaimed.

"Koudou-san! Damn it!" Heisuke cursed, furrowing his brow. "You had someone follow me, didn't you?"

"Goodness. First Harada-kun and now you. The Shinsengumi can be most trying." Koudou remarked before turning his attention back to his daughter. "Chizuru, today I have come to bring you back. As long as we have these rasetsus, we can revive our clan's former glory." He stated confidently, spreading his arms. Unlike Sumiko, who had always had something of a rebellious streak in her, Chizuru was an obedient girl. As the daughter he had raised from a tender age, she would not be able to turn away from him so easily.

"So, you truly mean to use these rasetsus to revive the Yukimura clan?" Chizuru asked, appalled.

"Of course!" Koudou replied matter-of-factly, still confident that even if Chizuru had some misgivings about the details of his plan, she would be incapable of betraying him. "Now then, come along, Chizuru." Koudou said, holding his hand out to her with a kind smile on his face.

"No!" Chizuru said, furrowing her brow in disappointment as she took a step back. How could he ask her to be part of something so terrible with the same fatherly smile he always wore when calling out to her as a child? She loved her father, but this was cruel and unfair. "I cannot go with you, Tou-sama."

Koudou let out a sigh of irritation as he clenched his fist.

"You've spent too much time with Shinsengumi. It would seem they have poisoned you, too." He said. That was the only explanation. First

Sumiko, and now even Chizuru! Although Sumiko had always been a bit headstrong, these country samurai were obviously a bad influence. They were really beginning to get on his last nerve. He raised his hand and gave the signal for his rasesus to draw their swords before slipping away.

"Run for it, Chizuru." Heisuke said as he stepped forward to face them, and the first enemy rushed forth to clash swords with him. "Hurry!" He grunted as he kicked another enemy away while still holding the first at bay. "Agh!" He cried out in pain as the cloud that had been blocking the sun passed, and its blinding rays hit him with their full force. "Ugk!" He grimaced as he grit his teeth and tried to steel his nerves against the pain. The other rasesus still seemed perfectly fine. That's right, unlike him, they could move around during the day without experiencing any pain or fatigue. Damn it, it looked like they really did have the advantage! Two more rasesus charged at him. "!" Heisuke managed to block them and grunted from the effort of pushing them back. "Damn it!" He cursed, wincing against the glare of the sun. "Guaah!"

"Heisuke-kun!" Chizuru cried out as the enemy rasesus launched another attack, cutting him on his arm and leg. "Stop it, Tou-sama!" She pleaded anxiously, squeezing her eyes shut. She didn't see Koudou step out from behind the hanging laundry until it was too late. "Hmph!" Chizuru gasped in surprise as he clamped a chloroform-soaked cloth over her mouth and nose with one hand and wrapped his other arm around her to stop her futile attempt to struggle against him. The more she fought to get away, the more chloroform she inhaled. She was out within seconds.

"Chizuru!" Heisuke shouted in alarm when he saw her go limp in Koudou's arms. "Ng!" He quickly shoved his current attacker away and cut him down so he could run over to her, but then another enemy rasesu ran up to block his way. "Chizuru!" Heisuke yelled, cutting him down.

But she couldn't hear him. Chizuru was out cold, and Heisuke soon found himself completely surrounded by enemies. Koudou was slipping away again.

"Chizuru!" Heisuke yelled as the enemy began to close in on him. "Kuh! Damn it!" He cursed his own helplessness in the situation. "Chizuruuuu!"

\_SLASH!\_ \_SLICE!\_

## 58. Assault On Sendai Castle

I own nothing but my OC.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Previously:<strong>

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\_SLASH! SLICE!\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 58: Assault On Sendai Castle<br>\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>"What<em>!<em>? Are you sure?" Hijikata asked sharply, furrowing his brow as he and Sumiko both ran to the house where he had left Chizuru.

"There's no mistake." Sumiko replied grimly, furrowing her own brow. "This recent rash of killings in the town is the work of the Rasetsu Unit. I had to cut one of them down myself."

"I seeâ€¦ There's no mistake then." Hijikata said, accepting her conclusion. Nearly all of the remaining men in the Unit had been on her operating table at some time before taking the Ochimizu. She wasn't likely to forget their faces. And although he didn't want to believe it, he had known from the start this could be a possibility, that San'nan-san might have betrayed themâ€¦

"I'm sorry." Sumiko apologized solemnly, knowing this wasn't easy for him to hear. "We finally get to meet again, and this is the kind of news I bringâ€¦"

"No, it's not your fault. But you sure do have a knack for finding trouble, Sumiko-san." He said with a wan smile.

"Contrary to popular belief, I don't go out looking for troubling. It finds me on its own!" She retorted with a wry smile, sweat-dropping.

"Guaah!" They heard a familiar voice cry out in pain as they drew nearer.

"!" Sumiko gasped as they exchanged an alarmed glance before picking up speed.

"Heisuke!" Hijikata shouted as they rounded the corner and sprinted towards the side gate.

"Hijikata-san! Sumiko-san!\_!\_" Heisuke exclaimed, surprised and relieved to see both of them together. They could now see Heisuke struggling to fend off a group of rasetsus in Imperial Army uniforms.

"These are Sensei'sâ€¦! So, it's as I thoughtâ€¦!" Sumiko said lowly, narrowing her eyes slightly, as she followed Hijikata in combat without hesitation as he leaped to Heisuke's

aid.

\_SLASH!\_

\_SLICE!\_

\_SLASH SLICE SLASH!\_

With all three of them working together, it was over within seconds. Hijikata and Heisuke stared at Sumiko, stunned. Her stance had changed. Despite their best efforts not to fall behind with the sun weakening them, not only had she done most of the work, but the speed and skill with which she dispatched and executed their enemies suggested that this was not her first time killing.

"I still don't like it." Sumiko said, as if reading their minds. She was staring at the blood that had splattered onto a clean, white kimono that was hanging from the line. "A human life is a heavy burden to bear. I was afraid I would be crushed by that weight, but there's something important that I have to protect, so I've decided to do what I have to. But I won't let myself be crushed. It wouldn't be fair to all the people I've outlived if I just up and died so easily. Instead, I've decided that for every person I've killed, I'll survive and live enough for their share as well, so that it won't go to waste. I'm tired of walking on eggshells. I'm not going to hold back any more." She turned to face them. "But enough rambling from me, where's Chizuru? Did Koudou-san take her?"

"Yeah!" Heisuke said, still panting a little. "He covered her mouth with a white cloth, and she fainted!"

"What!?" Hijikata said, clearly alarmed and concerned for Chizuru's safety. The two of them looked like they were about to immediately rush off and do something hasty, so Sumiko quickly grabbed them by the backs of their shirts to stop them.

"Hold on, I'm worried too, but we can't just go rushing off without a plan. There's too many of them for just the three of us to handle right now," but it would be a different story at night." She said with the hint of a smirk. Hijikata seemed to catch her meaning, and he calmed down slightly.

"But we can't wait that long!" Heisuke protested hotly.  
"Chizuru"

"Is with Koudou-sensei, right? Although it's worrisome, her life isn't in any danger as long as she's with him. He may be losing it, but Sensei still loves Chizuru like a daughter. He won't hurt her." Sumiko stated confidently.

"^"

**\*\*Sendai Castle\*\***

When Chizuru opened her eyes again, she found herself lying in a soft futon.

"Chizuru, are you all right?" Koudou asked with a look of gentle concern. He had been sitting beside her for the past several hours, waiting for her to wake up.

"Tou-sama!" Chizuru didn't move from the futon. She still felt a little disorientated. At a glance, she could see that they were in a very rich and ornately decorated room. "Where am I?" She asked.

"Be at ease." Koudou said softly. "This is Sendai Castle."

"Sendai Castle?" Chizuru gasped and bolted into an upright sitting position as it all suddenly came rushing back to her. "Where is Heisuke-kun!?"

"I'm sorry I had to get rough with you," Koudou apologized, "but I wanted to speak to you in a calm manner."

"Tou-sama!" Chizuru said softly. He was acting like her usual kind father now that they were alone. It broke her heart to think he had done so many horrible things. She never would have thought him capable of it! It didn't seem real.

"I want you to lead the oni as the last member of the main branch." Koudou said, reminding her that everything that had happened was indeed real. Chizuru bowed her head and looked away sadly.

"That is not what I want." She said, raising her head again. "Tou-sama, please change your mind!" She implored him earnestly.

"Chizuru, this is what Kaoru-kun wanted, and it is for your own good." Koudou said firmly. Chizuru gasped as the innocent and happy childhood memory of her brother smiling up at her resurfaced.

"Kaoru!" She said sadly.

"Kaoru-kun was a misfortunate child clear until the end." Koudou added solemnly. "I want you to carry on the ideals he imparted with you. Not a single day has passed where I can forget our people's tragic history. I swore I would someday make them pay for humiliating us!"

"No, Tou-sama!" Chizuru said, shaking her head. "Please don't seek vengeance. If you do, it will only create more sadness!" Koudou frowned and his expression hardened. He was obviously disappointed with her answer. "Tou-sama, you were my pride and joy." She continued sadly. "You saved countless lives as a doctor and earned their gratitude. That was the father I respected, ever since I was a child! Tou-sama, you should know that the weight of a human life is no different than that of an oni's."

"But!" Koudou said hesitantly, looking as though he was beginning to waver after hearing his daughter's heartfelt speech. He had never seen Chizuru look so determined before.

"Humans and oni can coexist as friends!" She continued earnestly. "Even learning that I am an oni, there were people who continued to treat me as their friend. That's why!"

"May I interrupt?" A familiar voice asked through the door, stopping her cold.

It couldn't beâ€¦|

"You may enter." Koudou replied, and the door slid open to reveal none other than the former deputy-commander of the Shinsengumi.

"San'nan-san!" Chizuru gasped as he entered the room.

"It has been a while, hasn't it?" San'nan greeted her coolly. Alarmed and unnerved, Chizuru quickly backed away as he took a seat beside her father and scrambled hastily to her feet.

"San'nan-san, what is going on!\_?" She demanded. Had he really betrayed Hijikata-san and the others after all!\_?

"In order to conduct research on the rasetsus, I secretly formed an alliance with Koudou-san." San'nan stated matter-of-factly, looking as cool as a cucumber.

"An alliance?" She asked, furrowing her brow. "Does that mean you have betrayed the Shinsengumi? Betrayed Hijikata-san?" The former deputy-commander simply stared up at her with a devious expression on his face in reply. "San'nan-san!" She yelled as hot tears began to form in her eyes, feeling betrayed.

"Ahh!"

"Ugh!"

Cries of pain and the sound of swords cutting flesh were heard just outside the room as the doors on the other side of the room suddenly slid open.

"Chizuru, you okay!\_?" Heisuke demanded urgently.

"Heisuke-kun!" Chizuru exclaimed with a look of immense relief on her face as she turned to face him.

"Heh. Slaying all those guys took awhile." Heisuke said with the hint of a smirk.

"Geez, look at you, trying to act cool. You make it sound like you're the only one doing all the work." Sumiko commented wryly as she stepped into view.

"Sumiko-san!\_?" Chizuru gasped in shock and surprise. "You're all right!" She cried with relief.

"Of course! You can't get rid of me that easily, Chizuru." Sumiko said with a wink, smiling at her friend. Despite the circumstances, she was happy to see her friend again.

"This is one strange castle." Hijikata remarked as he joined them with a stern look on his face. "There aren't any people and the defenses are weak."

"Hijikata-san!" Chizuru exclaimed, positively radiant with joy to see them all there.

"Tch!" Koudou grit his teeth in irritation and scowled at them.

"I thought it was about time for you to show up." San'nan stated coolly. "Though I must admit, I did not expect to see Miyagawa-san."

"What can I say? I'm full of surprises." Sumiko quipped as Hijikata stepped into the room and pointed his sword at San'nan, who calmly stayed where he was, while Koudou scrambled to get out of the way.

"Explain yourself, San'nan-san." Hijikata ordered sternly. "Are the murders in the town your doing?"

"No." San'nan answered. "I have slain rasesus who went berserk, but I never murdered innocents."

"Then why did you neglect to contact us?" Hijikata demanded. "And what are you doing together with Koudou-san?"

"You will not find what you seek in Sendai." San'nan told him. "The Northern Alliance plans to avoid entering the war." Hijikata appeared taken aback by this news, but he recovered quickly. "The brutal defeat Aizu suffered must have scared them. While I was spying on the enemy, I discovered that Koudou-san is dissatisfied with the Imperial Army."

"Just can't make up your mind, can you?" Sumiko asked as she and the others glanced questioningly at him.

"The Imperial Army secretly ordered me to come here, but I am fed up with all these human conflicts." Koudou explained, furrowing his brow. "I expect you came here to finish what you started at Ueno?"

"I'm here to stop you, if that's what you mean." Sumiko responded calmly with determination. Why couldn't she get him to understand that? "I went back to the battlefield to mourn you, but I suspected you were still alive when I noticed there were signs that someone had crawled out of the water on the opposite side of the bank." She glanced at San'nan out the corners of her eyes. "But why are you here with him, San'nan-san? Are you two working together now?"

The corners of San'nan's lips curved upwards.

"Sharp as always, Miyagawa-san." He said, glancing up at them with a sharp gleam in his eyes. "I joined forces with him so we could pursue creating an oni kingdom that will also harbor rasesus."

"What!\_?" Hijikata demanded, taken aback by his confession as the others gasped in alarm. Sumiko frowned. She had been afraid something like this might happenâ€¦

"I infiltrated the castle and assumed control of Sendai." San'nan continued.

"No wonder something seemed off about this castle." Hijikata said, furrowing his brow.

\_THMP. THMP. THMP. THMP.\_



Hijikata and Sumiko glanced around as the sound of hurried footsteps surrounded them.

"Crap!" She cursed under her breath when the other doors slid open to reveal hallways crowded with enemy rasetus. They were surrounded.

## 59. Scattering Cherry Blossoms

**\*\*Previously: \*\***

"The Imperial Army secretly ordered me to come here, but I am fed up with all these human conflicts." Koudou explained, furrowing his brow. "I expect you came here to finish what you started at Ueno?"

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\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 59: Scattering Cherry Blossoms<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Hijikata grit his teeth as he backed up to stand with Sumiko and the others.<p>

"At present, all of the rasetus in Japan are gathered here inside this one castle. They will be our ultimate weapon when we stomp out

the Imperial Army." San'nan said as Koudou moved to stand beside him.

"Come. Lend us your hand, Chizuru." Koudou said, holding his own out to her. "We need you to be our leader. Let's use these rasetsus to revive the Yukimura clan."

"Tou-sama," Chizuru said regretfully, staying where she was, "if you refuse to change your mindâ€¦ then you will no longer be my father."

"Kuh!" Koudou grit his teeth and let out a low growl of frustration as his eyes flicked from his adopted daughter to Sumiko. Not just one, but bothâ€¦ Sumiko must have been bad influence on Chizuru. She was never this strong-willed before. Chizuru had always been such an obedient and faithful daughter till nowâ€¦!

"What say you, Hijikata-kun?" San'nan asked. "Care to lead these rasetsus in a fight against the Imperial Army?"

"We don't need a Rasetsu Unit to fight out wars!" Hijikata declared sternly, furrowing his brow. He'd rather lose than allow Japan to become overrun with these bloodthirsty monsters!

"Then you leave me no choiceâ€¦" San'nan said gravely. He removed his sword from his side, pulling it from its sheath so that he was holding his sword in one and the sheath in the other. Hijikata grit his teeth and raised his own sword, preparing to strike the moment San'nan came at him. "We rasetsus can do nothing but fight. If you say we no longer have a place on the battlefieldâ€¦" San'nan grit his teeth and furrowed his brow as he raised his sword and struck down the rasetsu standing beside him.

"!" Hijikata's eyes widened slightly in shock as he and everyone in the room gasped. No one had been expecting that.

"Yah!" the rasetsu on San'nan's other side yelled as he tried to strike him down, but San'nan was too quick. As he spun around to face his attacker, San'nan blocked the oncoming blade with the sheath of his sword and struck the rasetsu down with a slash of his sword. San'nan furrowed his brow and grit his teeth as he thrust his sheath straight through the heart of the one that had been standing directly behind him, jumping back as their bodies hit the floor.

"Then it would be an act of mercy to put them out of their misery now!" San'nan finished determinedly.

"Heisuke! Sumiko!" Hijikata said.

"You got it!" Heisuke answered as he and Sumiko stepped up to join them.

"W-Why, San'nan-kun!\_?" Koudou asked, startled.

"I must apologize, but the Shinsengumi Commander's orders are absolute." San'nan stated coolly he stood together with the others.

"Heh. Were you planning this from the start?" Hijikata asked with the hint of a smirk, eyeing his old friend out the corner of his

eye.

"'To fool the enemy, first deceive your allies.'" San'nan quoted slyly as he adjusted his glasses.

"Heh. I seeâ€| Well, you certainly had me fooled." Sumiko told him with a rueful smile. She had never been so glad to be wrong before.

"San'nan-san, you're actin' way too cool." Heisuke said with a grin. The remaining rasetsus grit their teeth as they tightened their grips on their swords.

"Fools!" Koudou snapped. "Now that the Shinsengumi has lost most of its forces, how will you go about fighting?" None of them answered. They were all too busy cutting down any and all rasetsu who dared try to attack them.

"Yah!" Sumiko yelled fiercely as she decapitated one and stabbed another through the heart.

"Nng!" San'nan grit his teeth as he pushed back against his latest opponent. His eyes glowed red, and his hair faded white. He overpowered and slayed the other rasetsu in an instant. Heisuke and Hijikata soon followed suit.

"Stop! Please stop." Koudou begged, as he watched them destroy his creations.

"Look out!" Chizuru cried, quickly pulling her stunned father out of the way when the body of a slain rasetsu came crashing his way with enough force to take out a door, and he made no move to get out of the way. He was in shock. "Tou-sama, get a hold of yourself!" she said, concerned.

"Are you all right, Koudou-san?" San'nan asked as he stepped in front of them defensively. "I am sorry. I had planned on giving the Rasetsu Unit to the Shinsengumi, but if that is not possible, then I must do this!" He said anxiously. "I am out of time!"

"!" Koudou gasped in surprise and alarm.

"No matter how many times I modified the medicine, it still consumes our life force. They still suffer from their bloodlust." San'nan stated grimly. The number of men he had to kill after they gave into it and attacked civilians was staggering, and it was entirely his fault. "I have no choice but to personally bring this to an end!" He charged forward to cut down another rasetsu. "Koudou-san, you should be fully aware of this! You know there is no future for us rasetsus." He said earnestly. Koudou clenched his fists and bow his head in frustration and regret. 'Now, at long lastâ€|' San'nan thought determinedly as he continued to cut down on rasetsu after another. 'â€| I can bring this to an end!'

"Dyeh! Ungh!" Heisuke grunted as he kicked one rasetsu through a door, and cut down another. 'Don't hold this against me!' He silently pleaded, furrowing his brow with determination, as he finished off the one he had kicked and slayed another. 'After all, Iâ€| will share your same fate!'

"Tou-sama, get out of here!" Chizuru said, positioning herself protectively in front of Koudou as three of rasetsus turned their attention on them.

"Chizuru!" Koudou said, surprised and concerned. The three rasetsus raised their swords, preparing to attack.

"Hurry!" Chizuru urged him.

"Chizuru!" Koudou yelled as the rasetsus charged. Chizuru gasped and her eyes widened as he suddenly pulled her back and threw himself between her and their attackers. "!" He grunted in pain and coughed up blood as they ran him through with their blades.

"Ah!" Chizuru cried out in shock and horror. The three rasetsus withdrew their blades, and Koudou fell heavily to the floor. "Tou-sama!" Chizuru screamed, rushing to her father's side. "!" She gasped when she found the blades that had just stabbed her father pointed at her.

"Chizuru!" Sumiko yelled as she came flying over from the other side of the room, leaping over her friend and uncle to cut down the closest rasetsu, while Hijikata made quick work of the other two.

"Tou-sama, hang in there!" Chizuru said urgently as Sumiko knelt down beside her to check on Koudou.

"!" Sumiko gasped when she saw how much damage had been done. One of the blades had gone right through his heart! "Sensei! H-Hold on! Maybe there's still something I canâ€¦" She said anxiously, about to get up to get her tools, when Koudou reached out a hand and grabbed her wrist to stop her.

"It's all rightâ€¦" Koudou said wearily.

"Sensei, please let go..." Sumiko said with tears in her eyes. "Please, let me save you!"

"You already have." He told her with a wan smile. She looked in his eyes and saw gentle understanding and a readiness to die. Sumiko fell back onto her knees with tears streaming down her face. "I was always aware that there was no future for the rasetsus." Koudou continued, addressing both girls. But I simply could not bring myself to give upâ€¦ on reviving the Yukimura clan, your clanâ€¦"

"Tou-samaâ€¦" Chizuru sobbed softly as her tears fell.

"Chizuru, Sumikoâ€¦" He said, using what little strength he had left to reach up and touch their faces. "I fully understand how you feel. Follow the pathsâ€¦ that you believe in."

"Tou-sama!" Chizuru cried, holding his hand in place.

"Senseiâ€¦" Sumiko choked, biting her lip, as she held his hand tightly in hers.

"I am sorry. I never acted like much of father to youâ€¦" He apologized to Chizuru. "â€¦ Or an uncle." He added, glancing at Sumiko. "I always put the two of you through such

hardshipâ€|"

"That's not true!" Chizuru said, shaking her head. "It's notâ€| I have always been proud of you, Tou-sama. I cared for you as if you were my real father."

"When you told me we were familyâ€| I was happy!" Sumiko added earnestly, giving him a sad but heartfelt smile. Koudou smiled back, finally feeling at peace, and breathed his last. The two girls watched as the light faded from his eyes, and his body went limp. Sumiko hesitate for a moment, then gently reached out and finished closing his eyes.

"Tou-sama!" Chizuru sobbed as both girls began to cry even harder over their lost father and mentor/uncle.

"The Shinsengumi has lost a great deal of its military strength." San'nan remarked as the three men watched the girls mourn Koudou from a respectful distance. "Do you think you can win your future battles?" He asked Hijikata.

"No one fights with the intention of losing." Hijikata replied firmly.

"And Hijikata-san, you're one sore loser." Heisuke said with a smile. San'nan also smiled for a moment at that.

"We were a fruitless creation of the times." He said solemnly. "We never should have made rasetsus to begin with." Heisuke and Hijikata stood silent in agreement. Hijikata closed his eyes, and his hair faded back to black as he deactivated his rasetsu powers. With a sharp swing, he flicked the blood from his sword and slid it back into its sheath.

"Now then, shall we head on back?" He suggested.

THUMP.

"Heisuke!" Hijikata said, alarmed when he suddenly collapsed.

THUMP.

"San'nan-san!"

"!" Chizuru and Sumiko said, glancing up when they heard the urgency in his voice. Seeing the others lying on the floor, they immediately got up and left Koudou's side to check on them.

"It would seem I've reached my limit." San'nan said.

"Our lives have reached their end." Heisuke agreed.

"!" Chizuru gasped, stopping cold when she heard that. Sumiko clenched her fists and bowed her head. Hijikata kneeled down and reached for their hands.

"Did you know this would happen?" He asked as he held them.

"Yeah!" Heisuke answered quietly.

"It is my body!" San'nan said calmly. "Hijikata-kun, there were times when we didn't see eye to eye. But I have always acknowledged your abilities." His expression softened slightly as he continued. "I am proud that I could fight alongside you in the Shinsengumi."

"Yeah! I feel the same, San'nan-san." Hijikata said solemnly. His eyes shone in the light with the threat of tears.

"Hijikata-san, I'm in your debt." Heisuke said weakly. It was getting harder to talk now. "Even after I left the corps, you still welcomed me back!"

"That wasn't just me!" Hijikata said with a slight tremble in his voice as the crease in his brow deepened. "Everyone was worried about you. You're young, naïve, and quick to lose your temper."

"In the end, was I of any help?" Heisuke asked. Hijikata opened his mouth to reassure him, but found his voice suddenly failed him. It hurt too much to speak. He grit his teeth and furrowed his brow as he lowered his head, frustrated at himself and his aching heart as his body trembled and the tears began to fall.

"Live a nice, long life, Hijikata-san!" Heisuke told him.

"I will." Hijikata said.

"I don't really believe you." Heisuke said with a hoarse laugh. "Hijikata-san, you're such a hothead!" Hijikata let out a wan laugh.

"Don't act like a brat." He said as he tightened his grip on their hands.

"Yukimura-kun, Miyagawa-san! I have hurt you so many times!" San'nan said regretfully, looking up at the girls. "Please forgive me." Chizuru closed her eyes and shook her head.

"There's nothing to forgive." Sumiko said, smiling kindly through her tears as she spoke them both. Together, they walked over to kneel beside Hijikata. He looked up as Chizuru placed her hands over his, and Sumiko placed her hands over Chizuru's.

"Yukimura-kun, please look after Hijikata-kun." San'nan said in a quiet voice.

"I will!" Chizuru promised.

"Chizuru!" Heisuke said, getting her attention. "Please keep a close eye on him. Don't let him rush through life." Chizuru bit her lip as she let out a mournful cry. "Don't look at me like that. Please smile like always." Chizuru let out a couple more sobs as tears streamed down her face, but she forced herself to calm down and smiled as brightly as she possibly could for him in that moment. Heisuke smiled. "That's the one. Stay like that!" He told her. His eyes moved to Sumiko next. "Sumiko! take care of them!"

"I will." Sumiko promised seriously, smiling down at him as her tears

continued to fall. Heisuke closed his eyes with a smile on his face.

"!" They gasped as he began to turn to grey and ashen.

"Heisuke-kun!" Chizuru cried. They quickly glanced over at San'nan, who was also beginning to fade and turn to ash. Hijikata and the girls watched sorrowfully as Heisuke and San'nan's bodies were enveloped in that mysterious blue flame-like light as they disintegrated, and what remained of their hands crumbled and slipped through their fingers like sand in an hourglass.

Thus Sendai Castle was freed from the Rasetsu Unit's suppression.

## 60. The Blooming Hepatica

**\*\*Previously:\*\***

"Yukimura-kun, please look after Hiji-kun." San'nan said in a quiet voice.

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><p><strong>Chapter 60: The Blooming Hepatica<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>But the Sendai Domain's allegiance with the Imperial Army remained unchanged. Only Hoshi Juntaro and his western-style unit joined them. A few days thereafter, the former Bakufu army met up

with them, filling the soldiers with renewed bolster.<p>

Chizuru and Sumiko were making onigiri for the troops when Hijikata stopped in the open doorway of the kitchen. Sumiko had her back to the door while she cooked the rice at the stove. Chizuru was so focused on shaping the rice balls that she had yet to notice his presence. The atmosphere was quiet and calm. For a moment, he just stood there, watching them, enjoying the peace of the moment. Seeing the two girls working together again reminded him of happier days, before everything had gone to hell.

"Oh, hello." Sumiko said when she turned around, a little surprised to see him there.

"Hijikata-san!" Chizuru said, lighting up when she looked up and saw him. But Sumiko furrowed her brow slightly when she saw the expression on his face as he crossed the room to stand directly in front of her friend.

"Chizuru." Hijikata said.

"Hai!" Chizuru said, still smiling.

"I want you to stay here." He told her seriously. Sumiko frowned while Chizuru gasped, taken aback.

"By herself?" Sumiko asked dubiously.

"No, not by herself. You'll be staying with her." Hijikata said firmly. "Get away from all this fighting."

"No way!" Sumiko refused flatly, deeply troubled by this turn of events. How was she supposed to keep an eye on him if he sent them away?

"I will not allow you to accompany us to Ezo." Hijikata stated sternly as the crease in his brow deepened. This matter was not up for debate.

"W-Why not?" Chizuru asked, upset.

"Don't let us bind you down more than we already have." He said solemnly.

"We're here because we want to be!" Sumiko said earnestly. She still had to save him!

"No!" Hijikata snapped harshly, startling them. He hadn't meant to scare them. He had lost enough people already. He couldn't stand the thought of themâ€¦ He just wanted to protect the girls. "No." He repeated more gently. "Go search for your own futureâ€¦ and live." He would never forgive himself if anything happened to Chizuru. The girls would be fine so long as they had each other.

"Noâ€¦ Hijikata-san!" Chizuru cried, hurrying after him as he turned and left.

"Wait! Hijikata-san!" Sumiko yelled, right on Chizuru's heels as they followed him out.



"That's an order from the Commander of the Shinsengumi." Hijikata said firmly without turning back to look at them, using a tone of such finality that the two girls were forced to realize that there was nothing they could say or do to change his mind. Sumiko placed a hand on Chizuru's shoulder as they watched him walk away, and held her close as her own thoughts began to wander. Now what were they supposed to do?

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**\*\*October 1868\*\***

Hijikata and the others set sail for Ezo. A harsh wind was blowing as Sumiko and Chizuru stood together in the cold to watch the ship sail away from the harbor until it disappeared into the distance.

Once again on their own, the two girls took solace in the each other's company. They mourned the deaths of those they had lost, and Sumiko did her best to comfort Chizuru in Hijikata's absence. Over the course of the month they finally had a chance to stop and take some time to catch up. They each took turns filling the other in on what had happened on their side during their period of separation. The news of Sumiko's engagement to Kazama shocked Chizuru greatly, but she had the grace to be happy for her friend, despite the complex relationship Kazama had with Hijikata, and Sumiko did her best to reassure Chizuru that she wouldn't let any harm come to him. They decided to stay in Sendai for a time, since that was where they had buried Koudou, and they didn't have much money of their own left. To keep busy and earn some income, Sumiko began making house calls in the area, while Chizuru spent most of her time caring for the graves of Koudou, Heisuke, and San'nan. But they never stopped listening for news of the war and were always on alert for any information about Hijikata and the others.

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**\*\*November 1868\*\***

After Hijikata and his troops took the castle of Matsumae, the Matsumae daimyo who had ruled Ezo fled for his life, and the former Bakufu army took port without a fight off the coast of Esashi, which was west of Hakodate. Between the harsh Ezo elements and someone relaxing a little too much, the flagship Kaiyo and the cargo ship Shinsokumaru crashed on the rocks and sank. Thus Hijikata-san and the others lost the two main ships that had made their naval power superior to that of the Imperial Army's.

"Look here, Youta-kun!" Sumiko said with a sigh as she inspected his injured arm. "It's great to hear that you're so lively after recovering from that nasty case of pneumonia you had last month, but you shouldn't be jumping off of roofs!" She scolded him with a frown, giving him a flick on the forehead.

"Ow!" He said grumpily, rubbing his sore forehead with his free arm. "I've never heard of a doctor who injures their own patients before..." He grumbled in complaint with a pout.

"Be quiet!" His mother said sternly, in no mood for his lip after the crazy stunt he had just pulled. "If it wasn't for Miyagawa-sensei, you wouldn't even be here right now!" He had been near death when

Sumiko started treatment for his last illness. "How is it, Sensei?" She asked worriedly, hoping it wasn't too serious.

"Sorry, Ueda-san... but it's definitely broken." Sumiko informed her with a wry, sympathetic smile. This kid was such a handful.

"Oh, no!" Ueda-san gasped. "I-I'm afraid we might not be able to afford the treatment for thatâ€¦"

"Don't worry." Sumiko said with a wave of her hand, giving the fretting mother a reassuring smile. "I'll give you a special service in exchange for the news you just gave me about the war."

While Sumiko was setting and binding Youta's broken arm, Chizuru made her routine pilgrimage to visit the graves. As she climbed the long stairs leading up to the temple, she cradled a bouquet of white flowers in one arm, while she carried a bucket and ladle in the other for sprinkling water on the tomb. When she reached the top, she saw that the priest was sweeping up the fallen leaves.

"Oh," he said, looking up as she approached, "you're most admirable. Are you here to visit their graves again?"

"Thank you for tending to them." Chizuru said respectfully, bowing to him before continuing on her way. As she walked, it started to snow. The white flakes had already begun to pile up a little bit on the side of the road and many of the tombstones by the time she reached the graves she was seeking. Chizuru stopped short, and her eyes widened in surprise when she saw that someone unexpected was already standing in front of her father's tombstone.

"Kazama-sanâ€¦" She said, wondering what he was doing there. "Are youâ€¦ here for Sumiko-san?"

"Yes. I see Koudou is dead." Kazama stated calmly as he continued to stare down at the humble grave. It was far too small for someone who had caused so much trouble. "So that is the fate of any who stray from the Oni's path." While it was a relief for himself and many other Oni to know that Koudou would not be making any more rasetsumi, he had no doubt of the pain this outcome must have caused Sumiko, since she had wanted to save him. "Come to think of it, that guy said he would protect you, but in the end, he betrayed and abandoned you." He said as he glanced up at Yukimura Chizuru, referring to Hijikata Toshizo.

"!" Chizuru gasped as a pained expression flickered across her face for a moment. "You're wrong!" She said determinedly. "Hijikata-san isn't like that. Iâ€¦ Hijikata-san was doing it for meâ€¦"

"Really?" Kazama asked. Chizuru looked up, startled. She furrowed her brow and looked down as she remembered what had happened that day Hijikata-san left them. He had said that they should choose their own future, yet he had refused to let her choose a future with himâ€¦ Her silence told Kazama everything he needed to know. "That is why I told you not to trust humans." He said.

"It's not as though I followed them because I wanted their protection." Chizuru said, raising her head. "I wanted to stay with Hijikata-san and simply couldn't leave his side. Even if he never acknowledged me, Iâ€¦ just being with him was enough for me." Her

eyes were shining with the beginnings of tears.

"You are such a pitiable woman." Kazama remarked without malice. Chizuru squeezed her eyes shut and lowered her head. When she opened them again she saw that Kazama was now looking out at the sea that stretched beyond the hill.

"Do you plan to fight Hijikata-san again?" She asked.

"Supposedly I will stray from the way of the Oni if I meddle with him any further." Kazama replied, closing his eyes.

"So you won't?" Chizuru asked excitedly, immediately perking up.

"Female Oni, why does that make you so happy when the man abandoned you?" He asked, opening his eyes as he turned his head to look at her again. "You are so pitiful that it is funny."

"Ah." Chizuru said, looking down as her eyes shined with the threat of tears again.

"Hmph." Kazama said with the ghost of a smirk. He looked up as he sensed another familiar presence approaching. Sumiko paused when she caught sight of them, looking surprised to see him there.

"Kazama?" She glanced between him and Chizuru, furrowing her brow upon seeing the look on her friend's face. "What are you doing?" She asked pointedly.

"I came to get you, as promised." He replied with a smirk, glad to see she was unharmed. It had been a while since she looked at him with that komainu face.

"That's not what I meant. You'd better not be bullying Chizuru." Sumiko told him with a frown in a tone that let him know he was going to be in huge trouble if her friend cried. Chizuru was surprised to see that Kazama actually looked a little nervous now.

"She asked if I was going to fight that man again." He said with a slight frown.

"Are you?" Sumiko asked.

"An oni keeps his promises. I will finish things with him." Kazama answered seriously, looking her straight in the eyes. "I swore that I would."

"?" The crease in Sumiko's brow deepened as she stared back at him. His resolve was clear as day. He was determined to do this, even if it meant losing his status with his clan. There was nothing she could say or do to change his mind. She let out a heavy sigh. If that's how things were going to be, then she would need to start taking steps of her own. She had loitered around here long enough. "I see." Sumiko said, closing her eyes for a moment before walking over to Chizuru and gently talking her friend's hands in her own. "Chizuru, I'll be going with Kazama now. You should hurry up and go to Hijikata-san."

"!" Chizuru's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "Sumikoâ€|?"

"Don't worry." Sumiko told her with a soft smile. "Whatever happens, I'll always be on your side. We're friends aren't we? More than that, we're family. This goodbye isn't forever. We'll see each other again. I'm sure of it. Hijikata-san may think he's doing this for you, but the truth is he's just afraid to lose any more of the people he cares about. I know, because I've been there myself. But life doesn't work that way. Unexpected things are always going to happen. But that's why it's so important to hold onto the ones you love and be with them as much as you can, while you can. We can't let fear keep us from living. Being deeply loved gives you strength; loving deeply gives you courage. So go to him, and this time, don't take 'no' for answer!" She finished determinedly, giving Chizuru's hands a light squeeze of encouragement.

"Sumiko-sanâ€| Hai!" Chizuru said, nodding her head as she smiled with renewed determination.

End  
file.